

Americana

Nostalgia through Tradition and Self-Expression in Music



Johan Henrik Knutsen



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Department of Social Anthropology

University of Bergen

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The picture on the front page is my own. It depicts a mural in the 5 Points area in East Nashville. Several local landmarks are painted on it, as well as the American flag, the Tennessee state flag and part of the globe.

Acknowledgments:

First of all I would like to express my deep gratitude to all the people I met in Nashville. You made me feel at home in a very strange time in my life, in Nashville, a city that I experienced as much more different than I imagined I would. A particular thanks to Andrew who got me out of the tourist hostel downtown and who kindly introduced me to all his friends. It was only after I met Andrew and his friends that my fieldwork started in earnest. I would also like to thank the musicians who took time out of their busy schedule to talk to me. I would not have been able to write this thesis without your input. If any of you read this I hope that you don't find my arguments too farfetched. I would also like to thank Professor James Akenson for helping me in a myriad of ways, among them inviting me to the 31st annual International Country Music Conference. There is also no way I would have been able to write this thesis without the tremendous input and encouragement from my supervisors, Eldar Bråten and John Christian Knudsen. Last, but in no way least, I want to extend many thanks to all my friends, family and fellow students for their support and encouragement along the way.

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Introduction

Jason, one of the musicians I interviewed for this thesis, told me about music that “talking about it takes some of the fire out of it”. Music is in many ways beyond words, and good music often has an element of mystique to it there perhaps is no reason to investigate too closely. Still, I will attempt in this thesis to put into words part of what characterizes fans and musicians within a particular genre of music. I aim to explore the vaguely defined music that is inspired by country music while still being independent of the commercial country music industry. The focus is, in particular on the musical genre that is often called Americana. Furthermore, I aim to study fans as well as musicians, and I argue that much of what is true for Americana music are also true for the rest of the community that the musicians are part of. While Nashville is, perhaps contrary to popular belief, a city filled with music of all genres, I focus on a specific group of musicians that play music that can be called Americana music. I also study a community of people that is based in, but not limited to, East Nashville. Part of what initially intrigued me about Americana and other forms of independent and alternative country music is what it is an alternative to. Americana is, I argue, music that tries to draw on the country music tradition without drawing on the large amount of negative stereotypes attached to it.

Many people that I talked to said that they loved certain country music legends, while at the same time saying that they disliked country music. This seems to be a common trend among many music enthusiasts. Perhaps the way my own taste in music developed can be taken as an example. I listened to different kinds of American rock, blues and folk music and some country musicians such as Johnny Cash, Kris Kristofferson and John Prine. At the same time I used to dislike many kinds of country music, and I would not have called myself a country music fan until recent years. Somehow, I failed to see the connections that exist between many forms of traditional American music, such as country, folk and blues, both in terms of style and history, and I took the country artists I liked out of their country music context.

Authenticity in Music:

I first started thinking academically about country music when I wrote my bachelor thesis on authenticity in the genre. I started reading up on the discussions both on authenticity in itself, and on academic perspectives on country music. I quickly discovered that the debate on what is and is not “real country” is far from new, and that it has been ongoing among fans and scholars of country music alike for some time now. It turns out that research on authenticity is a huge field of which the literary critic Lionel Trilling is a founding father. Trilling’s ideas were well summarized by the anthropologist Richard Handler, and I will summarize it here briefly to give some of the theoretical backdrop to my thesis. The essence of Trilling’s argument was, according to Handler, that in ancient times it did not make sense to ask anyone whether they were true to themselves, that is, whether or not they were authentic as people. They occupied a position in the God given hierarchy, and that was their one role in society. This started, according to Trilling, to change with modernity. People were given more freedom of movement, both socially and geographically, which made it easier for them to make themselves out to be something they were not, and so the issue of whether people were sincere and authentic became important. This preoccupation with authenticity also bled into art, becoming a preoccupation with art that was what it claimed to be (Handler 1986).

Handler’s take on Trilling’s perspective is interesting, even though it carries with it some generalizations that I find hard to support. For instance, I doubt that authenticity as a concept is a modern or western phenomenon and that it was absent before modernity. Other scholars have used authenticity as a perspective to understand present day phenomenon without putting emphasis on the history of authenticity as a concept. In my opinion, Trilling was right in pointing out the importance of authenticity in modern life. Many of my informants told me straight out that they liked music that they saw as real or authentic. Another example is a Nashville based show called Music City Roots. It is popular show for Americana music which is simultaneously performed for a live audience and broadcasted on the radio. Between sets the host of the night, oftentimes the Americana

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veteran Jim Lauderdale, would promote the show for radio listeners, and he would repeatedly say that this was a show for authentic music. It does not matter much to my analysis whether or not preoccupation with everything authentic is a western and modern phenomenon, but rather what how authenticity is important to fans of and musicians within Americana music today.

The sociologist Richard Peterson was a leading figure in research on authenticity in country music. It is common to argue, as Peterson does, that authenticity is particularly important to country music. Musicians who appear and sound similarly to the country music of old are often seen as more true to their roots, and therefore more real. These are often artists that are close to what Peterson has called the hard core (Peterson 1997: 150). However, as I will return to in more depth later on in this thesis, he examines the history of the genre and argues that commercial and popular musicians, what he calls the soft shell, has been a just as important part of country music history. Peterson also points out that there have been many competing styles, in terms of stage clothes, that were seen as the authentic country music style. The three that Peterson discusses are of the old-timer, of the cowboy and of the hillbilly (Peterson 1997: 55-56). Even the most country of all instruments, the pedal-steel guitar, was introduced to the genre at a relatively late date by way of influences from popular Hawaiian music (Peterson 1997: 223). The perception of what is authentic and traditional is, in other words, forever changing.

The question of authenticity in country music is made even more complex because it is, as Peterson points out, in a way paradoxical. If a piece of music becomes too true to the original inspiration it becomes meaningless (Peterson 1997: 209). Like one musician, Charles, jokingly told me: “no one is ever going to make a better blues record than Howling Wolf, so there is really no reason to try.” Innovation and creative self-expression, which I understand as an artist’s relatively independent creative expression based on personal experience, is as much a part of authenticity as conservative tradition. In a way there are two ways of appearing authentic, being “true to oneself” and being “true to one’s roots”. I will explore both of these in the thesis, for instance by looking at how musicians front themselves as

being true to a tradition by creating certain ideas of the past, and how they are true to themselves by cultivating a craftsman like way of working.

Cool Country Music:

While I was working on my bachelor thesis, I suddenly realized that there were other music fans who shared my view of contemporary commercial country music. I was not the only one who thought that many old legends were more authentic than the commercial country music of today. I even started picking up leads on groups of young musicians who played music that I at the time considered good country music, many of which I in hindsight would call Americana musicians. I saw music by relatively young musicians like Justin Townes Earle and Jason Isbell, as well as musicians who were big in the 1990's, such as Lucinda Williams and Iris DeMent, to be truer to the country music tradition and more meaningful than today's country pop. Looking for new and interesting musicians became an important part of my fieldwork, and so it was an exploration in terms of discovering new music as well as meeting new people and learning a new city. My appreciation of Americana music is an obvious bias. I like these Americana musicians and the old country legends mentioned above more than commercial pop country. Though I know that authenticity is a matter of personal judgment, I cannot help feel that there is some truth to claims that old country music was more authentic.

I quickly realized that musicians who are seen as part of Americana in particular and alternative country music in general are incredibly diverse. The boundaries between different genres can be incredibly hard to draw. As I will explore in this thesis, the musicians I talked to tended to avoid genre labels all together. They seemed to think that musicians should be able to draw on whatever inspiration they wanted to, independently of the genre that inspiration belongs to.

I still find it useful to attempt a definition here for the sake of clarity, despite the fact that the musicians I talked to tended to avoid clear genre boundaries. One way of understanding

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Americana music is, as mentioned, to focus on what it is not. Americana musicians range widely in terms of style, but they definitely do not play commercial country pop. To complicate things further, there are bands that are more and less commercial and pop within Americana music as well. The British band Mumford and Sons, for instance, were constantly used in conversations as an example of a Americana band that was too pop. Unlike Mumford and Sons, typical Americana musicians are not superstars playing for packed stadiums. They rather play music that is at home in small venues and bars. Furthermore, Americana music is usually a hybrid genre that combines stylistic influences from country with other decidedly American genres such as blues, folk, rock, soul, gospel and bluegrass. Many musicians within the genre are singer songwriters and write sensitive songs where the lyrics play an essential part. There are plenty of overlap and shared history between the related genres, but I see Americana as different from other forms of alternative country music, such as alt.country. Most Americana bands put less emphasis on the aggression that comes with rock and punk rock influences. Alt.country was also more popular in the 1990's and early 2000's and seems to be in little use today. In some cases, Americana today refers to bands that would previously have been called alt.country, but the difference is still there.

Field Sites:

I initially considered several different field sites. For a while I thought about going to New Orleans, which has become the home of a group of young bands inspired by bluegrass and "old time" music, despite being primarily known for jazz music. Another alternative was a small town called Stillwater, Oklahoma, which has been the home to a community of musicians who have carved out their own country music subgenre called red dirt music. I also considered Denver, Colorado, which just a few years ago was the home of several bands with a particularly interesting and gothic mix of country music and punk rock. Nashville was the last alternative I looked at. Nashville has a long history of being the center of the commercial country industry, and so it seemed to me at first to be a bad choice. I researched the different cities mentioned above online, and found many articles about the exciting young singer songwriters who were based in Nashville, particularly in the still gentrifying East Nashville area.

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In the end, Nashville seemed like the safest bet, simply because I knew for sure that there was much musical activity in the city, both on stages and in studios. It also seemed, based on the articles on the web, to be a city that had a relevant creative community that was on the rise. Stillwater and Denver by contrasts, seems to have been home to musical communities that was very active for a while but who has since, at least to some degree, died down. At least by going to Nashville I could be sure that I would find people and music of interest. I must also admit that I was tempted by the prospect of studying alternative music within the metaphorical “lion’s den”.

Nashville turned out to be a good choice. Many of the people I met when I came to town were quick to point out that the city is about music of all genres, not just commercial country. I could not have imagined beforehand just how many people in that city were involved with music. Hopeful musicians, songwriters, sound engineers and businessmen come here from all over the country to be part of the music industry in one way or another. Many of them fail or end up struggling for years making their living in other ways. Most of the bartenders I came to know were musicians, and at one point a technician came over to install cable TV in the house I was staying in, and he told me that he had given up on a career as a sound engineer. This abundance of musicians is perhaps particularly visible on the east side of town, across the Cumberland River, where a vast creative community is forming. At the same time it must be said that, as one of my informants, Keith, pointed out to me, the press sometimes wrongly makes it seem like East Nashville is the only place in town with a young and creative community of musicians. In reality there are creative people working with Americana music all over the city.

I will describe my neighborhood in East Nashville, but first a few words on the rest of the city. When I asked musicians based in Nashville what they thought was the reason why Nashville became the center for music industry that it is today, many pointed to the fact that it is pretty much in the center of the eastern part of the country. You can get anywhere east

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of the Rocky Mountains within a few days drive from Nashville. Many Nashville residents also said that they felt that the city had a southern identity, but in a watered down way. Some people told me that they wished it had been more decidedly southern. One musician I interviewed, Charles, said that he found Nashville plain, and told me about how different it was touring in the “Deep South” outside of the city. The South is stereotypically seen as one of the most exotic regions in the United States. The historian David Goldfield goes so far as to say that the South has “functioned, for good or ill, as a national mirror, an object of hate, love, and fantasy that rarely approached reality but none the less satisfied certain basic national needs” (Goldfield 2002: 7). The exotic ideas about the South is attractive to many of the people who move here, but they find that it is not as exotic as some might have expected, which is partly because Nashville is a relatively large city and partly because the exotic image of the South is, as Goldfield points out, a fantasy. Another musician, Roger, told me that he thought that Nashville was culturally as close to the Appalachians as the South. The Appalachians can be seen as the place, except for the South, that is most important to country music’s identity. The Appalachians was the birthplace of many early country music stars. This makes Nashville ideally located, both of how easy it is for musicians to get around the country from there, and in terms of the fact that it is situated between two regions that are symbolically important to country music.

Nashville is a lot like many American cities in terms of geographical layout. It is not centralized and there are several hubs around the city with bars and restaurants. The most famous and visited of these hubs is the Downtown area, which is where most of the tourist industry is located. At the center of Downtown is a strip of road stretching for a few blocks, called Lower Broadway. The houses lining the road in this area are covered with bright neon signs advertising different establishments, most of them either touristy honky tonk bars or shops selling western wear and cowboy boots. Honky tonk is a term that can be traced all the way back to 1894, but it was not until the 1930’s that it took on its current meaning as a southern term for a place where white people meet to drink, dance and listen to music (Malone 2002: 161). Most of the Honky Tonks on Lower Broadway are made to look old and run down, with faded pictures of old country music stars on the walls. Still, some of the newer ones are made to look more modern. All of the honky tonks had live music, usually a

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singer or two playing cover versions of famous songs for tips from the crowds of tourists. In the summer, most of these bars were packed and the sidewalks were crowded with tourists in various stages of inebriation.

One musician, Jeffrey, told me that Lower Broadway had not always been this popular. It used to be run down and abandoned by all but musicians, homeless people and European tourists. The area started to change in the 1990's when musicians like Jeffrey started playing regular shows in the there, many of which became incredibly popular. Many honky tonks were built in response to this increase in popularity, but a few are old legends are also old legends, and they are places where musicians such as Willie Nelson used to entertain. Other noteworthy establishments in the area include Ernest Tubbs Record Store, which was once owned by the country music icon that it is named after, and the Ryman Auditorium, the original home of the Grand Ole Opry. The Ryman was originally built as a church but it was turned into a music venue, and it is still used for this today. The Country Music Hall of Fame building, and the giant Music City Conference Center, is both located just south of Lower Broadway. Both of these buildings are brand new. They are large, and the architecture is modern, though the brochure that is handed out at the Hall of Fame says that the architecture is meant to evoke timeless symbols such as a corn silo, the keys on a piano and the fin on an old Cadillac car. They both bear witness to the rapid growth that is happening in the city.

To the west of Downtown are the areas that are largely geared towards college students. There are several notable colleges in Nashville. Primary among them are Vanderbilt, which one informant, Andrew sometimes referred to as "the Harvard of the South", and Belmont. Belmont is one of the most important colleges for people interested in studying music and music business, and is located conveniently at the southern end of the famous music industry hub on Music Row. Music Row looked to me like any conservative upper middleclass neighborhood, perhaps except for the statue of naked people running in every direction, which is located in the middle of the roundabout at the northern end of the street. The streets were lined with trees and there were houses and office blocks beside each other.

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Still, it is home to many of the most famous record companies and studios in country music. Also in this part of town are a wide range of bars and restaurants that cater to the college students.

East Nashville is located just across the Cumberland River from the touristy honky tonks on Lower Broadway. This area has been through many changes. Most of the houses are small, most no more than two stories, with gardens. The East Nashville icon, Todd Snider, in fact, jokingly named one of his more famous albums East Nashville Skyline, partly as a spoof of the famous Bob Dylan record, Nashville Skyline, and partly because East Nashville, unlike Nashville's downtown area, does not have any skyline to speak of. While most houses looked affordable, some were beautiful old Victorian style houses. These Victorian houses drew attention to the fact that at some time in the past this must have been a wealthy neighborhood. It is however many years since East Nashville was a wealthy area, and for most of the 20th century it was a working-class neighborhood with a high crime rate. It became the home of many musicians who came to Nashville to seek their fortune but who could not afford to rent in a nicer, more expensive area. By the 1990's the amount of artists, as well as bars, coffee shops and music venues in the area increased dramatically. According to Andrew, one of the few Nashville natives I knew, this growth ironically gained a lot of momentum in 1998 when a tornado hit the neighborhood and caused significant property damage. Some of the trees that lined the streets were torn out of the ground by the storm, exposing the dilapidated but beautiful Victorian houses to view. The tornado also secured insurance payouts for homeowners who had insured their houses, and many invested this money into renovating their houses, causing the cost of living to increase in the area.

While East Nashville is still a relatively affordable neighborhood, the cost of living has increased dramatically and development and gentrification is spreading continually outwards from a couple of social centers. These centers, such as at the 5 Points area, built around a five way intersection, was home to a range of small shops, restaurants, bars and coffee shops. There were ever changing posters on the lampposts and even a hand painted mural that announced local shows. In the daytime, there was a range of people walking

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around with take-away coffee cups. At nighttime the restaurant and bars filled with patrons. The sound of their chatting was mixed with the sound of music from the bars, in some cases from records and in other cases from a live band.

The gentrification of the neighborhood is also a source of mixed feelings. Andrew told me at one point that he used to think that the development was a good thing, and that he felt like was part of something great by participating in the neighborhood. He said that at the time he wanted more people to be part of everything that was happening. Now he had started to think that maybe it was getting out of hand. He worried that many longtime residents were being pushed out of their family homes in favor of wealthy people from out of town looking for the next hip neighborhood. Investors and developers moved in and started building new houses, in some cases demolishing old neighborhood icons to do so.

Nashville also has an important place in the history of country music radio. Early country history is closely tied to the so-called "radio barn dances", which were variety shows with a country theme. These shows mixed country themed humor and sketches with some of the most famous country musicians of the time. There were many competing shows, but the one hosted in Nashville, the Grand Ole Opry, grew to be the biggest and most important one. In the 70's it moved from the iconic Ryman Auditorium to a huge brand new venue outside of town. The Grand Ole Opry Auditorium became the centerpiece of a tourist focused area called Opryland, which for the most part were made up of chain restaurants, hotels and an amusement park. The hotels and chain restaurants remain, but the amusement park was demolished to make way for a shopping mall.

The Grand Ole Opry is still broadcasting from the Grand Ole Opry Auditorium. It continues to draw a huge audience on radio, the internet and live, in the pews in the auditorium itself. The Opry is mentioned in many classic country songs, which is testament to its importance. Perhaps it is more surprising that it is also mentioned at the Stax Museum of American Soul Music in Memphis, Tennessee, as one of the major influences of early soul music

performers. This caught my attention because soul is a primarily urban and African American genre of music. Lastly, several of my informants pointed out as important that Nashville was one of the major centers for the music publishing industry. All the branches of the music industry are present in Nashville, and it is not all geared towards commercial country music. Nashville is also home to businesses geared toward working with smaller more independent bands and musicians.

Fieldwork:

My fieldwork, being based in an American city, was a far cry from the classic anthropological fieldwork, as discussed by Gupta and Ferguson (1997). Gupta and Ferguson describes the stereotypical fieldwork as being a white man alone in the bush in some exotic locale far away from the comforts of the West. If one should get the idea of doing fieldwork in the west one would, according to Gupta and Ferguson, have an easier time in terms of funding and prestige, if one studied some kind of marginalized group, as far removed from what Gupta and Ferguson terms “a middle-class self” as possible (Gupta & Ferguson 1997: 17). Part of Gupta and Ferguson’s argument is that this ideal of exotic fieldworks is not the reality of anthropology, and it should not be either. Many anthropologist studies communities close to home and the value of this knowledge should not be underestimated. In my case, most of my informants were not rich, but they were far from stigmatized. They were all white, and most of them were college graduates. Additionally, Gupta and Ferguson argue that the idea of the “field” is based on the assumption that is readily questioned in anthropological theory but not methodology. This assumption is that communities exist primarily in relatively stable bounded areas (Gupta & Ferguson 1997: 4). For instance, a musical genre is not something that can be pinpointed to one place. It is dependent on fans, critics, musicians and businessmen all over the world. In my case it would have been beneficial to study this, for instance by studying musicians on tour. This was not possible, due to the limitations of my relatively short six months of fieldwork.

One of the consequences of my choice of field site was that it was hard to get in contact with potential informants. Many city dwellers are busy people, particularly struggling musicians,

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most of whom have to work on several projects at once to make ends meet and who are often on tour outside of the city. The fact that these musicians were busy also made it hard for me to observe and be part of their everyday life the way ethnographers often strive to. One of my solutions was to go to public spaces by myself. I picked out three places to visit regularly, with the goal of getting myself out there. One of them was coffee shop, another a record store and lastly a bar and music venue. I went to all of these places several times a week. Sometimes I sat by myself, listening to music in the bar, browsing records in the record store or reading a magazine at the coffee shop, at other times I had random conversations with strangers. Some of these strangers eventually turned into friends that proved invaluable in my research. The fact that the people I got to know in Nashville were busy during the day also led to me spending a lot of time by myself. I spent much of this time reading up on local bands and music venues in magazines and on the web. This turned out to be valuable because Nashville is an incredibly busy city for music lovers. There were shows being put on that were relevant for my research almost every night of the week.

My fieldwork started in earnest when I got in contact with the two people I ended up living with. They in turn introduced me to their friends, who helped me in many ways throughout my stay. It was after I met these people that my fieldwork finally gained some direction. I could finally start exploring the East Nashville neighborhood, and I started going to the places I describe as my “hangouts”. Most of the people I met at my hangouts did not work with music, but over time I got to know some professional musicians as well. I ended up interviewing eight fulltime musicians. Each interview lasted for an hour or more. I am incredibly grateful for all the time these musicians took time out of their busy schedule to talk with me. Unfortunately, I only got the opportunity to sit down and interview each of them once, though I did small talk with some of them from time to time. I was also invited into two different studios, one of them while they were in the middle of making a record. Two visits to studios is far from enough to do a study of studio work in itself, but it did give me valuable insight into the process of creating music recordings nonetheless.

Informants:

I have changed the names of my informants in order to protect their anonymity. I have also tried to anonymize the places I described above as my main hangouts. Some people and places appear by full name but they are not my main sites of research or people I knew personally. In the cases where I have described a place I have done so in the past tense to highlight the fact that they are based on my own experience from a limited amount of visits. Someone who visited the places I describe at different times or in a different context might very well have a radically different experience of them. Take for instance my hangout bar. The owners put on many different kinds of shows, some more relevant for my thesis than others. My main case from this bar was a weekly event with cheap beer and live music where most of them could be described as Americana music. At other times the music ranged from hip hop to 80's music to traditional country music. Furthermore, I would like to add that some of my Nashville friends ended up not being part of the discussion in this thesis directly. This thesis would not have been the same without the great friends who hung out with me, talked with me, showed me around and invited me along to all kinds of events.

Some people will appear in these pages more frequently than others. I will now describe some of them, and parts of what they thought me. Andrew was one of the few Nashville natives I got to know. He was a music enthusiast, and had many great stories to tell of the many shows that he had been to as well as how the city developed through the years. He appreciated the Americana music trend that was quickly becoming a part of the city, as well as the way the city, and particularly East Nashville was changing, but he had seen the changes happen and he felt that something was being lost. He was one of the first who expressed concern that some young musicians were starting to play Americana music because it was trendy as opposed to playing it because it expressed something about them and their background. Andrew was also fond of pointing out that he knew people who used to be in "screamo"-bands who now had started to wear suspenders and straw hats and play Americana music. In other words, they had changed from a very different style, and started playing Americana music, Andrew suspected, because it was becoming fashionable.

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Jeffrey was one of the musicians I interviewed. He was an Arkansas native in his 40's. Many music enthusiasts I talked to gave him and the band he used to be in a large part of the credit for making Nashville the trendy city that it is today. They were part of a group of musicians who played traditional sounding country music and managed to become quite famous among country music fans who thought that contemporary commercial country music had strayed too far from its roots. Jeffrey and his band played weekly at one of the old Nashville honky tonks in the 1990's, and this show helped make Nashville residents interested in going to shows in their own city again. Jeffrey moved to the city in 1994, and immediately moved to East Nashville, despite the fact that the neighborhood had a high crime rate at the time. The fact that he has stayed in the neighborhood since the mid 1990's makes him an East Nashville veteran. He pointed out that the neighborhood had become a lot safer since he moved there, but that he himself had few experiences with crime. When he described the one time he did have his house broken into he was careful to point out that it was done by white people, thereby avoiding racial stereotypes. We met up for our interview at my hangout coffee shop, and he enthusiastically shared his great knowledge of country music history as well as his perspective on more contemporary music trends.

Jason was another musician I interviewed. I introduced myself to him after a show at my hangout bar. He has been playing alternative country music since the 1990's and he is still to this day a full time musician. It was easy to tell from the way he talked that he had a real passion for music. Most of his music had the energy of rock music and the intimacy of folk. He told me that he saw jazz music as the classical music of America and rock music as folk music. In his perspective, rock and folk music was the same kind of phenomenon, and so it made sense for him to combine them. Jason was incredibly kind and took the time to come talk to me in a break from producing a record. We talked in a coffee shop in South Nashville. Among other things, he was one of the people who got me thinking about how artists do not want to be put into a category. Musicians are freer to pursue whatever creative impulses they please if they don't have to think about their own work in terms of genres.

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The last informant I will describe here is a musician I interviewed called Roger. A friend of mine introduced me to him at one of his shows, and we agreed to meet at a local bakery one morning a couple of days later. Roger came across as a kind and thoughtful man. He had a college background, and had studied poetry. He moved to Nashville from North Louisiana. He characterized this part of Louisiana as the part that is the most “stereotypically southern”. He was very ambivalent about the South, talking about all the great art that came out of the region on the one hand and the terrible and racist politics on the other. He told me about his hometown that: “It is a great place to leave, and I mean that in a good way”. When he first moved to Nashville he wanted to become a professional songwriter, but the years when he tried this turned out to be some of the worst years for him creatively, and he eventually turned to writing and performing his own music. This, he told me, was because he found it much harder to write something that was meant for someone else and thereby distanced from his own personal experience. Among other things, he talked to me about visual folk art. For him, this folk art represented an ideal in that it was part of a tradition independent of the mass market but still an arena where the artist added something of his own. This was, for Roger, art, whereas creating music for someone else to sing, or for the market, was simply craft. Still, he was quick to point out that there is a lot of good music being produced for the market. When I asked Roger directly about what he thought about Americana he stopped and thought it over for a moment and then said: “well, it is easy to make fun of”.

Outline:

I would now like to give a brief outline of this thesis. The first chapter will deal with the difficulty of defining Americana music. I want this chapter to illustrate the diversity in the people, the opinions and the sounds that are involved in making Americana music what it is. The aim is to look at how musical styles are not only defined by the musicians actually playing the music, but also a wide range of other actors, including fans and businessmen. They all have different ideas about how Americana music should be defined, if at all. Sometimes these ideas overlap and sometimes they don't. The central argument is that the musicians I interviewed tended to see their work independently of genres in order to, I argue, maintain their freedom to draw inspiration from different genres. Jeffrey claimed that

strict genres are something that marketing people and other businessmen are focused on. Music that is grouped together in genres is easier to market. There are, of course, many exceptions to this market focused attitude. In some cases, such as for instance many independent record labels, the business is more in line with the view that musicians should think focus on their creative impulses first and genre boundaries and marketability second.

The theoretical perspective in chapter one is based on Pierre Bourdieu and his ideas about “fields of cultural production”, or fields for short (Bourdieu 1984). The central insight I draw from this perspective is that discussion about a cultural phenomenon creates the range of possible opinions one can have about the phenomenon as well as the range of possible actions within it. If we see a musical genre as a field it becomes a phenomenon whose boundaries are drawn by the wide range of people discussing it. These discussions then delimit what expressions that are seen as legitimate within the boundaries of the genre. It is not only musicians who have a stake in how the boundaries of the field are drawn, but also, for example, journalists, bloggers, businessmen and casual fans. These music enthusiasts have different and often conflicting ideas about what should and should not be included in a genre. Together they create the phenomenon that is called Americana music. This something is vague and dynamic, and it is different depending on who you ask.

In my second chapter I look closer at the argument that whether or not something can be seen as authentic is important to judgements of what is and is not good Americana music. I argue that in the case of Americana music there are two main ways of being seen as authentic and I draw on descriptions of two bars that both appear to be authentic, but in different ways. In one way, musicians can be seen as “true to their roots”, that is, being true to the history and tradition of the music that one is playing. In this perspective, some of my informants would argue that Americana music is more true to the country tradition than commercial country pop. That Americana is seen as authentic in this sense is, in a way, a paradox. How can a hybrid genre that draws inspiration from many different genres be an authentic representation of one specific musical tradition? Still, country music has also, like Jason pointed out to me, drawn inspiration from many different genres over the years. It

must also be added that commercial country pop musicians also experiment with different styles. The difference, as I see it, is that Americana musicians tend to experiment with older styles of music such as blues, whereas some contemporary commercial country musicians are experimenting with more modern styles such as rap music.

Musicians can also appear to be “true to themselves”, that is, being true to their creative impulses and life experience. Small coffee shops bars and restaurants with local and unique flavor gain popularity, as does music that reflects something personal about the musician that is behind it. This focus on expressing something about oneself, one’s creative ideas and experiences, is what I will refer to as self-expression in this thesis. For instance, most Americana musicians are singer-songwriters. They write their own songs, focusing on expressing themselves honestly about their personal ideas and experiences. Ideally Americana musicians should balance these two ways of appearing authentic. They should be able to convince the audience that they are true to themselves and their creative integrity in addition to being true to the tradition and history that they are part of.

The dynamic between these two different modes of authenticity is central to my thesis, and I aim to explore it in more detail in my third and fourth chapter. In my third chapter I look at a particular weekly show at my hangout bar, and how the artists who performed here expressed common ideas of history and tradition. In my view, what made this event important for the musicians and audience involved, was that it was a shared experience. I argue that it is at events such as this that fans and musicians come together and practice and discuss music, and through this they develop shared ideas about musical style. Style is understood the way Feld understands it, where the focus is put on the fact that style, at its core, is a way of making music that is so convincing that it is emulated by other musicians (Feld 1988). This perspective makes style into an issue for all fans of the music in question, whether they play music themselves or just listen. The event highlighted experimentation and worked as a showcase of new and upcoming bands. It puts focus on the personal and unique about each artist, but still, it was a striking example of how much these bands shared, in terms of presentation. Many of them for example had a preference for the style in

general and instruments in particular that were used by musicians between the 1950's and the 1970's. I argue that events such as the one I will describe in this chapter are examples of how music enthusiasts come together and create ideas about musical style as well as the very tradition that the music is seen as part of.

Lastly, in my fourth chapter, I look at how people in East Nashville, on and off stage, favor quality over quantity in music as well as other goods, such as coffee. The local and handmade is valued over the mass produced. This encourages people to work in a way that focuses on the process of working, and on the other people and the materials that are involved. I draw on the sociologist Richard Sennett in saying that this way of working is a form of craftsmanship (Sennett 2008). Sennett sees craftsmanship as a way of working that puts emphasis more on the process of production instead of the outcome. Rather than machines carving the same product out of raw material a person is making a product while paying close attention to everything involved in the process, such as limitations with the specific batch of raw materials or the particular tool that is used at the time. The idea is that the product should, in this way, become more personal, more unique and ultimately of superior quality compared to one created in a more industrial way. This focus on craftsmanship applies for trendy coffee shops as well as music studios, which are my two main examples in this chapter. Among Americana musicians the ideal of singer-songwriters is an obvious example of craftsmanship. This ideal of a singer songwriter carefully crafting a song from personal experience and then performing it themselves stands in stark contrast to the negative stereotype of the commercial country music business on Music Row. According to many people I talked to in Nashville at least parts of this commercial music industry operates in an extremely specialized system where songwriters work nine to five in offices and sell their songs to musicians who are chosen primarily for their stage persona and not for their talent.

Conclusion:

Even though I have tried to define it superficially to give the reader some idea what I am talking about, Americana music is in itself an ambiguous phenomenon, for better or worse,

Introduction

and perhaps that is the way it should be. Still, I do hope to show how many musicians within Americana music share certain ideas of what makes music authentic, despite the diversity of styles within the genre. I also hope to show how these musicians are part of a community who share many of the ideas about tradition, craftsmanship and authenticity and creativity in a more general sense.

Chapter 1: Producing Americana

Struggles and Cooperation in the Formation of a Genre

I first came to Nashville with the idea of studying alt.country. With me I had knowledge of the music that was important to this subgenre in the 1990's and early 2000's. It did not take long before I realized that none of these musicians were particularly relevant today, but also that it was unclear what kind of music, if any, had taken the place of alt.country. Many of the music enthusiasts I talked to preferred to talk about what they called Americana. This was a genre that I realized was related to alt.country, but I was left in the dark as to what, specifically, characterized it. There was little agreement among the people I talked to about what was and was not Americana music, apart from the idea that it was somehow made up of influences from different kinds of American "roots music". Many even had a hard time pinpointing what bands they themselves thought did and did not play Americana music. The musical styles that were often referred to as Americana ranged from acoustic singer-songwriters to country-rock bands inspired by punk rock.

In this chapter I look at the vague boundaries of the Americana music genre. I argue that this vagueness has to do with the fact that there is a range of people involved in the creation of Americana as a musical and as a genre category. They range from musicians to businessmen to casual fans, who all have a stake in defining what is and is not Americana music.

Americana and Radio:

I will start this chapter with a quote from an interview I did with a musician I have called Jeffrey. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, he is from Kansas, but has stayed in Nashville longer than most. We sat down in my hangout coffee shop. The inside was a big open space, dotted with tables. People were sitting at these tables, working on their laptops,

many of them with a rhyming dictionary by their side. Jeffrey was an enthusiastic person who was passionate about music, something that was easy to tell from the way he talked about it. He wore a brown embroidered western shirt and a straw cowboy hat.

I started by asking him questions about East Nashville, and about Americana music and other kinds of independent country music. Shortly after starting the interview I told him about a message I had read on the social media Twitter. It was written by Sturgill Simpson. Simpson was a Nashville based independent country musician who had just then released his second album and was in the midst of a surge in popularity. In that message Simpson argued with someone from an independent radio station. Simpson jokingly said that he would have stood a far greater chance of having his record played on that station, if he had called his record “Metamodern Sounds in Americana” instead of “Metamodern Sounds in Country Music”. In response to this, Jeffrey told me while smiling jokingly:

“I like that guy more every day. You know, trying to get your record played on the radio is a long tradition. People would give the radio DJs hookers and blow, but you talked to them like that. [The band Jeffrey used to be in] did that a couple of times. This one time we were in Memphis and it was our one day off. We were scheduled to do this radio thing and first the guy kept us waiting in the hall for about half an hour, which is insulting. Then he had us come in his office and told us that they had listened to our music and they thought it was just a little too edgy for them. Meanwhile the record was standing there unopened. We asked him whether he wanted to listen to it now, and he said no, we know what it is like. We told him that sometime you have to have some balls, and he told us that the problem with putting your balls out there is that sometimes someone will come and cut them off. I asked him, is that what happened to you?”

I took this to be a story about how musicians and businessmen, in this case a radio DJ, are sometimes at odds, and how musician’s style is important in determining what opportunities are open to him. The musician wants to reach out to an audience and to get exposure for

their work and creative vision. The radio DJ wants to maintain a certain profile and to satisfy his listeners. It is worth noting that radio has historically had, and continues to have, a great importance for musicians, music listeners and music business alike. Radio was perhaps particularly important for country music, a genre that for a large part gained its reputation from “radio barn-dances”, and Nashville which became famous for being the host city of the Grand Ole Opry, the most important barn dance show. Jeffrey told me about radio at a later point in the interview that: “...everyone listens to it in the car or at work or whatever. It still carries weight and getting on the country radio stations is still the money shot”.

Later on in the same interview I tried to get a clear idea of what kind of music Jeffrey thought of as Americana. I mentioned a couple of musicians and bands from the top of my head that seemed to me at the time to be different while still firmly in the Americana genre: the Avett Brothers, Shovels and Rope and Jason Isbell. Jeffrey smiled and said: “I love all those guys, but do you know what they have in common? None of them get any airplay on the commercial country stations”. Later on, I discovered that while they were not played on commercial country music radio, they were played on independent and public radio. I took this to mean that while getting played on the radio can be an index of success for musicians, there is a significant difference between being played on an independent or public radio station and being played on a commercial country radio station. Tuning into a radio station is an active choice, and listeners often choose a radio station based on what kind of music they want to listen to. This encourages radio stations to have genre specific playlists that is tailored to fit the tastes of a particular group. Musicians get tied up with the kind of radio station they are played on because different channels expose them to different audiences.

Musicians Between Genres:

Being played on the radio is important to how musicians are perceived in terms of style and genre, but some of them still don't fit comfortably into any genre. These musicians can serve as examples of how genre boundaries are drawn. Sturgill Simpson is an example of such an musician, particularly his aforementioned second album, *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music*. Musically the album sounds like country music from the 1970's, more so than

modern commercial country music. The production is rougher and less polished and the band consists simply of an electric and acoustic guitar, drums and bass. Still Simpson uses experimental techniques such as tape loops and a so-called “chorus” effect on the electric guitar. These kinds of effects are iconic of psychedelic music from the 1960’s but rarely used in country music. Lyrically many of the songs deal with the traditional country music theme of religious devotion, but Simpson blends references to Christianity with ideas from religions that are non-conventional for country music, most notably Buddhism. On top of this Simpson also sings about the mind-altering properties of drugs. The album does, in other words, not fit comfortably in the playlists of commercial country radio, who focuses strictly on popular contemporary country music. Some music enthusiasts might see it as too country for Americana and too “weird” for country. Still, the record has been doing extremely well, and Simpson even seems to have managed to cross over and gain attention fans and performers of both commercial country and the Americana music. Simpson has managed to be publicly praised by commercial country artist Keith Urban on Twitter (Trigger 2014) and win the 2014 Americana Music Award for Emerging Artist of the Year at the same time.

Sturgill Simpson can be seen as an Americana musician edging in on the commercial market, but there are also musicians who cross over from commercial country to Americana music. One good example of this is Kacey Musgraves. She is decidedly a commercial country artist, but she has also acquired a following among fans of Americana music. Her music sounds a little closer to the country music of old, compared to many other commercial country musicians. For instance, her typical sound has an emphasis on acoustic instruments. Musgraves is also unconventional when it comes to lyrics. She writes her own songs and many of them are more “edgy” than the typical commercial country music songs, touching on topics which are usually not discussed. In “Follow Your Arrow” she sings about the societal pressure put on women, as well as expressing a liberal attitude when it comes to issues such as homosexuality and marijuana. In “Merry Go ‘Round” she even dares to criticize small town life, the very core of many lyric tropes in country music. One person I talked to even claimed that Musgraves had problems getting played on commercial country radio because she said in an interview that people should stop writing so-called “truck songs”. Songs about people riding trucks is one of the most common themes in commercial

country music today. Many music enthusiasts I talked to used the truck song theme as an example of one of their main gripes with commercial country music, that the lyrics are simply shallow new spins to old tropes. Perhaps the reason why Musgraves became popular among some Americana music fans is because she has taken a vocal stand against ideas that is, admittedly, at the heart of modern commercial country music, but which is also an important part of what many of my informants saw as the decline of the genre.

Americana and the Business:

Business is essential in shaping how musicians are viewed by the public, but what is the relation, more concretely, between Americana musicians and the music industry? Diane Pecknold (2011) has written an analysis of just what part the business played in the growth of alt.country music. It is worth noting that Pecknold doesn't seem to distinguish between Americana and alt.country. In a way it does make sense to avoid distinguishing the two genres because they have a lot in common. Some musicians who are seen as Americana today started out as alt.country, and many organizations that started out as a way to help alt.country musicians now have Americana musicians as clients. Still, I see them as two distinct genres. Americana seems to be the word that is preferred when discussing alternative country music today, whereas alt.country was hardly mentioned by anyone I talked to.

Pecknold argues that the reason why alt.country suddenly emerged as a genre in the mid 1990's as opposed to earlier was exactly because it filled a commercial niche (Pecknold 2011: 31). Her main argument is that alternative country music is nothing new in itself, but it became a genre when the music industry found a way to make money from it. Alt.country emerged at a particular point in country music's history when the big record companies started focusing on a few superstars, such as Garth Brooks and Shania Twain, at the expense of lesser known musicians. Alt.country was seen as a possible way to make a profit from what Pecknold calls "the disappearing middle-market sector". The middle sector is understood as the musicians who sold enough records to make a living but not enough to become superstars, or, as musicians who sell in records in the hundreds of thousands rather

than in the millions (Pecknold 2011: 36-37). Independent record labels, such as Bloodshot Records, Sugarhill Records, E Squared and New West Records, all with their specific and varying public image, were set up to sign the artists who were too small or appealed to too small a group of customers for the major labels. Another example which is not mentioned by Pecknold but which is perhaps even more interesting is the Nashville based company Thirty Tigers. Thirty Tigers handle marketing and distribution for musicians while letting them have full creative freedom and ownership over their own work, thereby cutting out the middlemen entirely. Other commercial interests came in the form of internet discussion groups and fan magazines, but most important was the formation of the Americana Music Association, also known as the AMA. They describe themselves in this way: “The Americana Music Association is a professional trade organization whose mission is to advocate for the authentic voice of American Roots Music around the world (Americana Music Association 2014a).”

What is significant here is that all of these minor labels and internet discussion groups defined themselves as separate from what they saw as the megalomaniac big industry of the day. The independent labels wanted to work with more modest sale-targets. Fewer sales meant more limited budgets. These limited budgets were, however, not seen as a big problem for the alternative country musicians who wanted to move away from the lush and extravagant sound of commercial country (Pecknold 2011: 41). More importantly, it also allowed the artists more creative freedom because they did not have to worry about selling millions of records to break even. While the smaller budgets meant that the musicians had to restrict themselves, they were given more freedom to do what they wanted within certain limitations. The economic strategy of the independent labels made it possible for them to take on the same perspective as the artists. These new labels started arguing for quality, however defined, over marketability; art should be made for art’s sake. This art centric attitude also helped the independent industry legitimize their existence and their contribution to the art by offering a different kind of service from what the major labels offer.

How do the musicians balance these creative and commercial interests? In the view of Nancy, a veteran of the scene and the wife of prominent musician, musicians based in Nashville are more conscious of being part of the business than similar musicians based in other cities. Still, as one musician, Jason, pointed out to me, many musicians try to separate themselves from the business. I interviewed him at a small South Nashville coffee shop, and we talked about his ideas about the challenge of genre boundaries. He thought that most artists wanted, instinctively, to avoid being grouped together by someone else. As an example of a group that sometimes does this kind of grouping, he mentioned the Americana Music Association. He was quick to point out that the AMA did a lot of great work in helping and promoting many up and coming musicians. At the same time they were, according to him, a relatively small clique that actively tried to define what was and was not Americana music. Jason pointed out that there are certain musicians who are favored by the AMA, the veteran Buddy Miller being perhaps the prime example. While Jason was himself a fan of many of these musicians and their work, he did point out that they become an example of what the AMA wants Americana music to be. In effect the AMA helped draw lines for what was and was not Americana music independently of the musicians' own perception of themselves. Jason wanted to be able to make a comfortable living, for sure, and he knows that being a businessman is part of being a working musician, but at the same time he wanted to hang on to his creative freedom and integrity, and to avoid being typecast by someone outside of his work.

Institutionalization and the AMA:

The AMA has without a doubt had a great positive impact on Americana as a genre and on many musicians' careers. For instance they have worked to promote Americana as a radio format, separate from commercial country radio. This has helped a lot of smaller acts get radio air time. Still, Roger expressed concern about how the Americana radio format has developed in the interview I did with him. When I asked him straight out what he thought of the term Americana he told me that:

“As a radio format it used to be broader and more interesting. This sounds silly, but I wish it would have been more like an American version of world music. It should be

all of American music, not just the ones of Scottish and Irish descent, with the occasional African American thrown in there for politeness sake.”

This quote suggests to me that he thought that we should understand Americana music as a wide genre of music with even more diverse styles and influences than what is true for what is seen as Americana music today. This would allow artists operating within it to draw from a wide range of genres and it would make Americana music a more true representation of American roots music.

One of the ways the AMA promotes Americana music as a radio format is by publishing the Americana music radio chart. By having a separate radio chart for Americana music, lesser known musicians become visible to the consumer. Still, this chart was not without its own problems. One musician friend of mine, Anna, was fond of pointing out just how unfair she thought it was for people like her to compete with musical legends such as Emmylou Harris, Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan for positioning on the chart. These are established legends who are guaranteed a prominent spot on the chart, and therefore there is a real risk of lesser known musicians such as Anna getting lost in the crowd.

Another specific activity of the AMA is the Americana Music awards. In giving out awards the work that the AMA does to promote its vision of Americana music becomes apparent because it is explicitly about highlighting the musicians who were seen as last year's best examples of the genre. A quick glance at the list of recipients reveals that the different awards have been given to musicians ranging from newcomers, such as Jason Isbell, Justin Townes Earle and Sturgill Simpson, to music veterans such as Emmylou Harris, Rodney Crowell and Buddy Miller. The category “Emerging Act of the Year” is an obvious example of such support for new musicians. The “Song of the Year” award also seems to be an arena for relative newcomers. Justin Townes Earle and Jason Isbell have both received this award, the former in 2011 and the latter in 2012 (Americana Music Association 2014b). Both of them were relatively unknown names in the industry at the time, even though their popularity has been rising steadily since then. Americana music has even worked its way into the Grammy

Awards system, though in these awards every single recipient has been a legend whose career started long before the 2000's when Americana started becoming the genre it is today. They range from Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell to Levon Helm and Mavis Staples. That is to say, they don't really range much at all neither in terms of style nor background. In fact Levon Helm, Mavis Staples and Emmylou Harris all appeared in the famous concert movie "the Last Waltz" which was filmed as early as 1976. It becomes apparent that there is a difference between what the two organizations see as good Americana music. The Grammy system promotes a view of the genre that is based on the veneration of old, whereas the AMA promotes more young musicians, while still honoring the heroes. Still, the artists who the AMA promotes have a particular style. For example, both Jason Isbell and Justin Townes Earle play relatively "mature" music, that is, they write sensitive songs oftentimes with a sad lyric without the strong aggression that characterized the alt.country of the 90's.

The lyrics of the two songs that won the Americana Awards in the "song of the year" category can serve as examples of what kind of songs the AMA values. The songs that won Justin Townes Earle and Jason Isbell their awards were "Harlem River Blues" and "Alabama Pines" respectively. The first one contains the lyric "Tell my Mama I loved her, tell my father I tried, to give my money to my honey to spend", and goes on to say that the protagonist is going to the Harlem River to drown, which can be taken literally or as alluding going to Harlem to buy drugs. "Alabama Pines" contains the lyric "the AC hasn't worked in 20 years, probably never made a single person cold, but I can't say the same for me, I've done it many time", and goes on to discuss feelings of hopelessness and self-loathing with references to alcoholism.

Creative Expression and Marketing:

Music is inseparable from business. Musicians and businessmen alike have to make a living. This applies as much for small as for large record labels, whatever their public image and marketing strategy is. Part of the marketing involved in the music industry is grouping similar musicians together. These groupings also, presumably, make it easier for music fans to find

music that is similar to music that they know that they like. It is beneficial for marketing to view music as groups of distinct genres so that it can be marketed to different groups of consumers. As Jeffrey told me when we discussed marketing:

“If it weren't for the marketing guys there would be no genres at the record stores. My record collection is organized alphabetically, not by genre.”

It could be argued that this comment is nothing more than an expression of Jeffrey's personal view of how music collections should be organized. I, however, see it as an example of the view that Roger and Jason seemed to share, that music should not be seen as clearly distinguished genres. Perhaps the different perspectives of musicians and marketing people is the reason why the term Americana is used so frequently in marketing while it is seldom used by musicians to describe themselves. Most of the musicians I interviewed told me that they did not know what to call their own music in terms of genre, preferring to leave that question unanswered. At the same time these musicians said that they did not mind if journalists or fans saw their music as part of a genre, they themselves just preferred to focus on the music independently of genres. None of the musicians I talked to were hostile to the industry. At one time I said to Jeffrey that there seemed to me that there were a lot of musicians, including his old band, that were in opposition to the commercial industry geographically and symbolically centered in the Music Row. He quickly pointed out that:

“We were not in opposition; we wanted to be country stars. We wanted to be up there with Garth Brooks. Everyone was looking for a hit. What was different was that our stuff grew organically. It did not have any Music Row guy behind it who planned it”

While musicians rely upon sales and marketing in order to make a living just as labels and radio stations do, they uniformly claimed not to care what genre their own music belonged to. One young singer-songwriter who I interviewed, Keith, stated that he could not bring himself to criticize other people's taste. He argued that everyone is entitled to their own opinions. Another musician, Dennis, said straight out that he would not refute anyone else's

attempt at putting his music into a genre, though he did not know, nor did he seem interested in, how to categorize it himself. One possible interpretation of this unwillingness to be part of a genre is that musicians strive for the artistic freedom to draw on whatever inspirations they want.

The Audience:

Musicians and businessmen would not have been able to make a living without an audience. It can be hard to make a distinction between musicians and audience in Nashville, given that the city is so focused on the music industry and that a large portion of the population works with music in some way. Frank is one of the non-musician music fans that I got to know. He was employed in politics, but despite his busy work schedule he found the time to go to several live shows a week. The number of shows he attended would vary, but sometimes he would go to a show as much as five nights a week and on occasion he went to several shows in one night. He was the man to ask if you wanted to know if there were any good shows on at a particular day. I spent many hours with him, discussing music and going to shows. We saw everything from the 1970's punk influenced art-rock band Television to young Americana singer songwriter Andrew Combs. At one point we, along with a few other friends, were invited to come to a mastering studio where a friend of ours worked. Once we got there we got to listen to music through a sound system that was the very top of the line. We took turns picking songs and among the ones Frank picked were Eric Church, a commercial country music star. Frank listened to music from a broad spectrum of styles, always with the same passion. He was more of a music enthusiast than a music snob. He seemed to reflect what Nancy, a dedicated music fan and a musician's wife told me:

“People who love music tend to say that there are two kinds of music, good and bad. They don't say that they hate country and like jazz or whatever.”

This appreciation of a wide range of music can be seen in the light of the ideas of prominent music sociologist Richard Peterson. He wrote an article with Robert Kern (1996) where they argue that the American elite has become less snobbish. Rather, they have become what

Peterson and Kern call “cultural omnivores”, expressing a liking for cultural phenomenon of all kinds, not just highbrow. Still, the trend of cultural omnivorousness does not mean that taste is no longer an arena for expressions of class distinction (Peterson & Kern 1996: 904). The question has merely shifted from one of what one likes to one of what range of things you like and how and why you like it. The omnivore perspective has come under heavy debate. One of the important issues being discussed is whether or not being a cultural omnivore can be seen as primarily an elite phenomenon. It seems unlikely to me that taste as a marker of social status has disappeared, but that was not Peterson’s point anyways. It rather seems that in certain groups, value of deep knowledge about a limited range of high brow art has decreased in favor of knowledge about a wider range of genres. It is way out of the scope of this thesis to argue whether or not the trend of omnivores applies to American society at large, it does very nicely illustrate the situation for fans Americana music. I have not met a single Americana music fan who was not also an avid fan of a music from a range of different genres as well. Every one of these Americana music fans seems to me to be been excellent examples of cultural omnivores. While many might not be as extreme as Frank, many did for instance express a liking for on the one hand old commercial country stars such as George Jones and punk rock on the other hand.

In another article, written with Bruce Bael, Peterson compares alt.country to teen music in saying that alt.country is defined more by its fans than stylistic similarities between the bands operating in the genre. Furthermore, they go on to say that alt.country gets very little exposure on radio and television, two arenas that are very important for many other genres of popular music. They rightly point out that alt.country, as I would argue is also the case with Americana, is promoted primarily on the internet as well as at live shows and through the sale of CDs (Peterson & Bael 2001: 244). A trend that is more recent than Peterson and Baels study is that CD sales have been replaced more and more by music in digital format and on vinyl records. Interaction between fans and musicians is important to Americana music; it is after all a genre that is usually performed in performed in small and intimate venues. When it comes to the musical performance it seems more likely that in going to so many shows, usually in a small venue like a bar, people like Frank with a deep admiration for music come to sympathize with and even befriend musicians. I often saw musicians chat

with members of the audience after shows. In this way fans develop a connection with musicians, which might help them identify with the musicians struggle to maintain creative freedom. The cooperation between fans and musicians might also be reinforced by the discussion over music that finds place on the internet, in between sets at a bar or over vinyl records in one of the local record stores. In other words, the commercial concerns involved in the creation of music, both from the musicians and the industry is an important factor in shaping Americana music as a genre, but Americana music might be an example of a niche and independent genre where fans and to some extent the business have the musician and his or her point of view in mind.

Douglas Holt, a professor of marketing, argues that most scholars who have done studies of the U.S. inspired by, or in critique of, Pierre Bourdieu, including Peterson, have based their research on a misunderstanding (Holt 1997: 101). He argues that Bourdieu did not mean to study high and low brow culture in itself, it just lended itself nicely to his object of study, France. What were important to Bourdieu, according to Holt were rather the practices of inclusion and exclusion that underlie consumption, which material culture in some cases can stand in for. In societies such as Bourdieu's 1960's France, where the distinction between high and low culture was very clear, high cultural phenomenon can stand in for inclusion and exclusion, but this is not the case in all places and at all times (Holt 1997: 102). When it comes to class distinction, it does not matter whether or not the American elite has become omnivorous, because there are still mechanics of distinction in the form of unequally distributed knowledge about cultural phenomenon. Distinction is still present if someone, because of their background, is unable to understand or appreciate a piece of music. In this it does not matter much if the music is an elite phenomenon like classical music or if it is country music.

Holt mentions country music, and criticizes other researchers for using it in surveys as an indicator of low class. He argues that there are different kinds of country music that appeals to different people, and that country music in general therefore is a bad indicator of class. People with low cultural capital, a term that I will return to shortly, tend, according to Holt,

to favor contemporary commercial country, whereas the people he asked with high cultural capital tended to favor traditional country. Holt hypothesizes that this is because traditional country music symbolizes something old and authentic in the case of people with high cultural capital, and dated remnants of a not so pleasant past recent for people with low cultural capital (Holt 1997: 116-117).

Field Theory:

Pierre Bourdieu himself might not have given country music in itself a lot of attention, but his framework of field theory might help us understand how different actors have an interest in the boundaries of the genre. A field of cultural production, or a field for short, is for Bourdieu (1983) the consequence of people taking positions in debates, in the particular case of art it is about the debate of what is and is not included in the genre in question. A field is a dynamic space of possible actions and judgments that come into existence as a consequence of individual actors taking on an opinion and a position within an argument about what should be its boundaries. Still, people are not free to take on whatever position they want. This is because the field is in itself a powerful structure of social life. One's position within it combines with, but is also based on, one's background. One's position in the field then limits the range of opinions that is seen as legitimate. One can only take positions within a limited space of possibilities, based on one's background and roles within the field. In other words, businessmen and musicians might have very different backgrounds and roles in the creation of music, which contributes to them having very different interests in what is and is not defined as Americana music.

I take Bourdieu's perspective to mean that genres, understood as fields, are the product of debate over boundaries, and that these debates feed back and limit what it is possible to say about these exact same boundaries. A field is created by actors and their voicing of opinions, but it is also limiting as to what opinions it is possible to raise. What kind of weight an argument has is strongly influenced by who utters it and his background and position in society. The actor's background shapes one's amount of capital, understood in a wide sense (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu distinguishes between many different kinds of capital. Economic

capital is closest to the everyday use of the term, being capital that is of direct monetary value. In addition to this Bourdieu writes other kinds of capital, most importantly social and cultural. Social capital can be understood as social connections. Social capital is about knowing people who can help you achieve your goals. If you have a wide range of contacts, and these contacts are useful, you have social capital. Cultural capital is the capacity for authority, which again stems from ways of being and behaving, such as knowing how to behave in a way that makes you seem confident, or relevant cultural knowledge that can legitimize a position of authority. Learning to behave in ways that make you seem like an authority, like knowing how to look like you are at home at a show or having knowledge about a phenomenon, such as for example American folk music, gives this kind of authority. I will return to these kinds of capital in chapter four, but for now, it is sufficient to say that having cultural capital that is relevant for a field of cultural production is the same as having authority within that field.

An important aspect of Bourdieu's notion of fields of cultural production is that they are made up of more than just the artists who create the actual works of art. The field includes everyone who has an interest in the discussion of where its boundaries should be drawn. In my case this includes people such as businessmen, fans and journalists. These people have different backgrounds and different roles within the field, and therefore different ideas about where its boundaries should be. While all artistic fields are in a sense subfields of what Bourdieu view as the dominant and overarching economic and political field there is a significant difference as to what degree it is independent of it (Bourdieu 1983: 319). In what Bourdieu calls the "field of mass audience production" artists gain legitimacy from economic factors such as numbers of sales. In the other extreme you have the field that is relatively autonomous from the dominating economic and political field, and which is characterized by limited production. Here the artists gain legitimacy from being recognized and praised by other more established artists (Bourdieu 1983: 320-321). In the former type of field commercial success is the goal, whereas in the latter the logic of the market is, as Bourdieu says, turned on its head and limited numbers of sale are seen as an artistic virtue because it is a sign of exclusivity. These are only two extremes, most actors in the field are somewhere in between.

I would argue that Americana music can be seen as an example of the struggle between actors in the field who want Americana music to be independent of the market and actors who focus on commercial success. On the one hand there are art as a commodity and on the other art for art's own sake, though few people belong squarely to one camp. Jason and Jeffrey both want to maintain freedom from the market, and to focus on quality, that is, art for art's sake. Many radio DJs and marketing people, on the other hand, want to focus on sales and commercial recognition. In practice businessmen and musicians make a compromise somewhere in between. All musicians have to make a living, and so they rely on the market, but the logic of the autonomous field, with its focus on recognition from other musicians and promises of quality, can also be profitable.

It is interesting to note how the musicians I have talked to express themselves differently depending on whether it is their own artistic vision they are talking about or whether it is Americana in general or the music industry. While they all acknowledge that somehow Americana is a genre out there, at least in marketing, they tend to want to keep their distance from this category. They are independent of neither the industry nor the audience, but they try to maintain as much of their creative freedom as they can. In attempting to avoid being put into a genre they make themselves less easily marketable, but then again, there are many people who share the attitude that the musicians I talked to expressed. All of the Americana music fans that I encountered were also fans of many different kinds of music, and they always looked for artists who stood out from the crowd no matter what genre. In this way diversity within the Americana music genre becomes valuable in itself within a, admittedly limited, market. It is a market that I interpret to be more aligned with what Bourdieu calls an autonomous field of cultural production, one that values the acknowledgment of a group of established trendsetters over market success. Independent record labels have carved a market for themselves with the artists who are too small for the big record companies to give them attention, and the internet has made it much easier to spread the word of and sell records across the globe. Bourdieu's framework makes sense in

terms of the careful skepticism that is expressed by many musicians towards the AMAs because the Americana Music Association is institutionalize a genre with strict boundaries.

Conclusion:

I agree with Peterson that what we are dealing with is not a stylistically coherent genre in the conventional sense. Furthermore, he is right in pointing out the audience's role in demarking the boundaries of the genre. Still, I do not agree that what Peterson points out is what is of primary importance. Rather, we are talking about a wide-ranging group of people, from musicians to sound engineers to casual fans, who have ideas about what these boundaries should entail. The audience as well as the musicians who create the music and the business that is responsible for marketing it all have ideas about what Americana should be. These opinions are all influenced by their position. As I have argued, there is a clear tendency for musicians to try to avoid identifying with a genre in order to be able to draw inspiration from styles from a wide range of musical genres. Radio DJs on the other hand want their show to have a set identity, and to accomplish this it helps to have a playlist with music that seems stylistically coherent.

Chapter 2: Authenticity

Doing the Old Stuff in a New Way

One of the factors that are constantly brought up when country and Americana music is discussed, by my informants and academics alike, is that it should somehow be real or authentic. Authenticity seems to be central to understanding what people see as appealing in Americana music. As with many of the points of this thesis, I argue that it also extends to a large part of the creative community in East Nashville who are not musicians. It is, however, hard to pinpoint what exactly authenticity means. One way of appearing authentic is by being seen as part of a tradition. An Americana musician can appear more authentic if his music can be seen as a continuation past styles and traditions. This link between the musician and the past can, for example, be created by drawing inspiration from legendary musicians or by employing the kind of style and equipment that one's heroes used. Another way of appearing authentic is by being true to oneself, not understood as being true to "self" the way the term is understood in anthropology but rather being true to one's artistic vision and creative impulses. Furthermore, nothing is authentic in and of itself; authenticity only exist in people's individual judgment of various pieces of music. A piece of music is judged in relation to other works and deemed either authentic or inauthentic. In this chapter I will examine ideas about authenticity, first by looking at two different bars which I argue both represents different ways of being seen as authentic, and then by looking closer at how musicians try to express themselves in ways that are seen as authentic.

An Old Nashville Institution:

The Station Inn was one of the places people repeatedly told me I had to go to in order to get a feel for "the real Nashville". When I got there, it looked to me like it belonged to a bygone era. It looked out of place, located between a range of high-rise condominiums. It was a grey one-story building with flat roof. The name was written on an illuminated sign outside. The sign was one of the only indications that the bar was anything other than an old

warehouse. When I got inside I was greeted by the friendly face of an employee who collected the money for the cover charge and checked my I.D. It was important for them to collect the cover charge because they did not sell tickets in advance, despite the fact that the venue was host to well-known artists. The policy of not selling tickets in advance also meant that tickets were sold on a first come first serve basis, which meant that on some nights there would be a long line outside, hours before the show started. I got the impression that this was how things used to be done in Nashville, possibly because it was hard for small venues to sell advance tickets before the internet.

Inside, the walls were covered with posters of artists who had performed there over the years and many of the posters were signed. Few pieces of furniture matched, but tables and chairs were set up in rows where the audience sat down to watch the show. The staff would usually not allow more spectators than there were chairs for despite the fact that they would have been able to pack in a lot more people if they took the chairs and tables out. The room itself was dark, and the ceiling was low with large wooden rafters. Dark untreated wood made up the roof and walls, giving the room a rural feel, like a cross between a small saloon and a cabin. This feel stood in stark contrast to the gray concrete exterior walls. Behind the bar stood a fridge that was covered in stickers with band names on them. The bar had two kinds of beer on tap, a mass produced one and one from Yazoo, the biggest local craft-brewery, located just a couple of blocks away from the bar. The beer was often served in pitchers that were shared among groups of friends. The patrons of the bar appeared to be of all ages and both sexes. They all dressed casually, I don't remember seeing very many people at the Station Inn who stood out from the crowd. Casual checkered shirts and jeans was a common sight.

Most of the shows took place on a small stage to the left of the entrance. It was only slightly elevated, and behind it was a wooden sign with the name of the bar written on it. All of the musicians that I saw perform here would mention between songs that they felt lucky to be playing at "the world famous Station Inn". One of these musicians was the 90's alt.country legend turned acoustic troubadour Robbie Fulks who once wrote a song about Nashville

called “Fuck This Town”. He did not seem bitter when I saw him though, and from stage he talked about how he had played at the Station Inn once before in the late 1980’s. Back then, the area was full of warehouses. He claimed that “You put your life into your hands if you came here”. Today there is very little risk involved in being in this neighborhood, which highlights how much this area has changed. As I have mentioned, it is now filled with brand new high-rise condominiums and fashionable bars restaurants and shops. I had several informants tell me that they saw the area that the Station Inn is located in, the Gulch, as a perfect example of planned gentrification gone wrong.

Apart from normal shows, the Station Inn was particularly famous for the Sunday night bluegrass jam. People repeatedly told me that this was an event that I had to witness. Unfortunately I only made it to this event once, but I was still impressed. The musicians were sitting in a circle of chairs on the floor instead of on the stage. All the traditional bluegrass instruments were present: banjo, mandolin, guitar, upright bass and fiddle. A couple of musicians would take turns being the lead singer, but many of the musicians joined in at appropriate times. The musicians, as well as the audience, were of all ages. Judging from their looks, they ranged from 15 to 70. The person who took on the role of lead singer for a song usually took on the role of bandleader as well. He or she would signal who was to play the next solo by giving them a barely perceptible nod. Furthermore musicians frequently joined and left the circle, and newcomers were given the opportunity to play a solo on the next song. Even musicians who played acoustic guitar were given a chance to play a solo, despite the fact that the instrument is hardly audible over the loud sound of the banjos and mandolins. In fact the guitar, which is such an important instrument in much of American music, has traditionally been used largely as a rhythm instrument in bluegrass.

An Eastside Neighborhood Hangout:

The Station Inn can be called authentic because it is seen as a remnant of the way Nashville used to be, but I argue that another venue, the Family Wash, can also be seen as authentic despite being much newer. It was housed in an old abandoned laundromat. It was a one story building and might have looked as nondescript as the Station Inn had it not been for

the striking blue paint on the outside walls and the big neon sign above the door where name of the venue was written. The interior was cluttered everywhere with different memorabilia, ranging from an old cell-phone nailed to the wall to a toy replica of the starship USS Enterprise from the TV series Star Trek dangling from a rope above the bar. In the bathroom I saw a painting of a giant figure of Jesus standing next to the UN building in New York, seemingly blessing it. The walls were painted a bright yellow and the roof was covered with chains of lights in different colors. You entered the building in a small anteroom with large inside windows giving a clear view of the main room and the stage. The stage itself was opposite of the entrance, and behind it there was a large American flag that had been hand painted directly on to the wall. The bar served a wide range of beers, including several local micro-brews, and they had a small kitchen that had specialized in English food, such as bangers and mash and shepherd's pie. It was not unusual to see groups of guest who went there primarily to eat in the early evening, and this was one of the very few occasions where I saw children in a bar. It was also a very popular space for locals, musicians and non-musicians alike, to hang out and you could often find some of the regulars on stage playing for their friends. There were people of all ages, and I often saw patrons sitting in groups listening to music together or enjoying a discussion.

Two Forms of Authenticity:

My informants saw both of these bars as real or authentic, but, I will argue, in different ways. I took the fact that the Station Inn was a rugged remnant of "old Nashville" in the middle of the brand new condominiums to indicate that it was authentic in a nostalgic way, one that puts emphasis on continuation and on history and tradition. As I mentioned, it was seen by many as an example of "the real Nashville". That the Station Inn stood in such strong contrast to the neighborhood it was in only made the historic ideas of it, and thereby its claim to authenticity, all the more clear. The bar and the surrounding buildings was an example of the contrast between what the city was seen to have been in the past and what it was becoming. Nashville was changing, becoming more modern and metropolitan than old fashioned and southern. The Station Inn was also unique in that it was and has always been a "home base" for a group of musicians that were outside of the slick country pop music that the music industry in Nashville is known for and which helped the city become known as

Music City, USA. What can be said about the way the Station Inn is seen as authentic, as something that is primarily a continuation of a tradition, can also be said about bluegrass music. Bluegrass is seen as, and has roots in, folk music, despite the fact that that the modern sound of it can be traced back to the style that Bill Monroe developed in the mid-1940's (Peterson 1997: 213). When it comes to Americana music, bluegrass is one among several popular sources of inspiration. It stands for something old, rugged and rural, which is what many fans and performers of Americana appreciate and value, but, as I will argue, it is not the whole picture of what constitutes authenticity in the genre.

The Family Wash can also be seen as authentic, but in a different way. It is part of the change that is happening in Nashville, though most of my informants would identify it with the positive effects of this trend. They would identify it with the influx of creative and artistic people, not with the commercialized development and rampant gentrification that long time residents such as Andrew complained about. The Wash did have a limited claim to being part of Nashville history. It was owned by an East Nashville veteran from the 90's. Still, it was nowhere near the historical importance or fame of the Station Inn, which advertised that it had hosted shows of live bluegrass music since 1974. I argue that the Family Wash's claim to authenticity was its community and atmosphere, and their supporting attitude towards musical expressions of a wide range of styles. More so than the Station Inn, it was a place to express oneself creatively and experimentally and a place where one went to hang out and talk with friends. At the Station Inn, Sunday night was the night of the traditional bluegrass jam. At the Family Wash a jazz band played on Sunday nights, and they pointed out from stage that this was one of the few regular jazz shows in Nashville. The freedom of creative expression was also visible in the decoration of the Wash. Seemingly random trinkets littered the walls, which reflected the owner's personal history and artistic vision. Some of the more whimsical decorations might have been meant to indicate that here was a space where everything was allowed. There was, for instance, a note next to the cellphone I mentioned saying that this was the phone the owner used during the 1998 tornado outbreak, which, as I mentioned in the introductory chapter, hit East Nashville hard and played a big part in making it the neighborhood it is today.

Authentic Music:

One difference between musicians who specialize in bluegrass and Americana musicians is that bluegrass is a form of folk music with strict genre boundaries and with musicians who dedicate their life to mastering it, in terms of technical skill. Americana is music for people who want to draw on many sources of inspiration and it is music where one does not always have to play perfectly for the music to be appreciated, though skill is valued. The bluegrass formula for authenticity is in other words to reproduce the “old time”¹ sound accurately, whereas artists within Americana music wish to draw on many sources of inspiration to create something that is at the same time unique, personal and traditional. The Station Inn and the Family Wash can be seen as two different sides to what Peterson has described as the paradox of authenticity: music can be seen as authentic if it is similar to some original work, but if a piece of music becomes a too authentic reproduction it becomes meaningless; one can after all just listen to the original (Peterson 1997: 209). I understand this to mean that the two different ways of appearing authentic that I have described are, to some extent, at odds. Authenticity in terms of similarity to the original is limited by a lack of originality, but if one focuses more on individual creativity one might end up sacrificing some of the similarity to the traditional. The Station Inn for the most part sticks to the traditional, while the Family Wash emphasizes personal artistic expression and thereby puts less focus on authenticity as continuation of tradition.

The importance of being seen as authentic becomes even clearer when you compare the music that is played at bars like the Station Inn and the Family Wash to the commercial country pop that is still crucial to the music industry in Nashville. Many music enthusiasts told me that they respected the work and skill that went into the making of many of those recordings, but that it is not for them personally. Sometimes these people followed that statement by talking about of how artificial they thought commercial country pop was. For

¹ It is worth noting, as an example of the strictness on the boundaries of the bluegrass genre, that many fans operate with a distinction between bluegrass and «old time music». The difference is barely perceptible for an outsider, but one informant explained to me that old time music is less focused on individual solos and more on the band playing together.

instance two different people mentioned how they thought it was just pop music with a hint of country, one saying that it is “just pop music with a fiddle” and another that “it is Aerosmith with a steel guitar”. The essence here is that these people see commercial country pop as a genre without connection to its history, a genre that has abandoned its roots in favor of present day trends. The very height of contemporary influences in commercial country pop music is the sub-genre that is popularly referred to as “bro-country”. This sub-genre tries to fuse country music with rap music while focusing lyrically on dirt road parties with pretty girls and pickup trucks. Bro-country was hugely popular before and during my fieldwork and was a common target for ridicule by fans of Americana and old school country music.

Hard Core versus Soft Shell:

This debate of what is and is not authentic country music is common, both in bars and in academic books. Peterson is an important figure in the academic discussions of authenticity in country music. He argues that country music can be divided into what he terms hard core and soft shell styles. It is important to note that he uses these terms more as tendencies than strict categories, he does not claim that anyone fall squarely in one category or the other. Artists who are identified with the hard core style tend to have a rougher and more confrontational or nonconformist image. They usually sing more rowdy songs that give the impression of being based on personal experiences and problems. Their sound is also typically less polished, meaning that less emphasis has been put on making the music sound smooth and lush. Peterson uses Hank Williams sr. and Johnny Cash as examples of the hard core. I argue that Americana music, as well as much of the bluegrass that is played at the Station Inn, also can be seen as hard core, both in their own way. The musicians who are closer to what Peterson calls soft shell usually have a more polished and accessible sound and they sing about themes that are seen by many as less controversial, such as patriotism, Christian devotion and innocent love. Examples of this are people like Chet Atkins, “Gentleman” Jim Reeves and, I argue, the modern commercial country pop stars such as Keith Urban (Peterson 1997: 150).

It is one of Peterson's main points that neither the hard-core nor the soft shell style is older or more authentic than the other. Rather, they have competed for dominance from the time country music was created (Peterson 1997: 154-155). Still, the hard core style is often seen as more traditional, and it incorporates fewer modern day stylistic influences such as for instance rap music and electronica. Peterson's analyses of country music history shows that hymns are as much a part of country music as drinking songs, and it has been that way from the very beginning. To some extent the two styles exist in different markets, something that is very visible in Nashville. The hard core and the soft shell play off each other in a way that increases the market appeal of both. Hard core country music gains reputation by presenting the soft shell as commercial and lacking in personal experience and depth, soft shell country music increases its appeal by presenting the hard core as old fashioned, unrefined, harsh and in some instances morally questionable (Peterson 1997: 150).

Personal Image and the Insincerity of the Overdone:

The idea that a style should be seen as authentic is important in clothing in addition to music and decoration of bars. Just like in decoration of bars, musicians have to dress in a way that looks convincingly authentic. This entails dressing up in a way that indicates your style, in terms of fashion as well as art, without overdoing it. Andrew, who is a non-musician music fan, told me a story that illustrated this balance of style. He works in an office building that also houses companies in the music industry. Once he told me he sometimes met musicians in the elevator in his office building. One time he met a man who was dressed in a straw hat and jeans rolled up so far that it "looked like he had been scrambling in the mud catching crawfish" as Andrew put it. Andrew said that to him, this man looked like he was straight out of a cartoon. He contrasted him to artists like Andrew Combs and Sturgill Simpson, who dress relatively normal and presumably have found a balance between drawing on a tradition and expressing themselves without looking like a stereotypical character. This focus on not overdoing a style is also an example of the paradox of authenticity I have already mentioned. In reproducing an "old time" style too perfectly they end up looking out of place, out of time and like they are simply playing a role. Ultimately, they look insincere, and so also inauthentic.

The idea that some musicians simply copy a style was also something I discussed with Roger. We had a coffee in a bakery in East Nashville one morning and discussed, among other things, the predictable strategy some new musicians within Americana use to present themselves to the public. Roger started talking about the kind of young Americana bands that he did not like, and also touched on the issue of personal experience as a base in songwriting, saying:

“It is usually young vocal groups and they are usually acoustic. If I see another banjo, I think I will throw up. That is not to say that I hate the banjo, it is just that it has become so predictable. I love the banjo on Tom Waits' records for instance. You have these young groups moving here from Brooklyn with their mandolins and banjos, and it is boring. Where is the art? And many of them are technically very good, but just not very interesting. There is always this tension with lived life in music, like Gillian Welch being from Beverly Hills and writing "Orphan Girl" and Chuck Berry being a 35 year old man writing about teenage girls, but then this could also be allegory. I found out recently that Welch was adopted, and that kind of makes her writing that song make sense. It does not need to be personal experience in the direct sense.”

Americana musicians should not, in this perspective adopt a style without having the background to support it, directly or indirectly, or without adding something of themselves to the finished music.

Being True to Oneself:

Being seen as authentic by maintaining creative freedom, what I have called being true to themselves, is related to what Sennett describes as the “the myth of creativity”. Sennett argues that many adherents of this myth see artists as creative geniuses capable of creating art out of thin air, which Sennett argues, is a romanticized image of how artists work (Sennett 2008: 290). Still, this myth of creative geniuses is important in Americana music. The man in the elevator was not convincing exactly because he looked like he had copied someone else instead of making his own style. For Americana musicians, the “myth of

creativity” is also evident in the importance that is put in writing one’s own songs. The idea is that artists can express themselves much better, and much more truly, if their songs spring from their own experiences, rather than from the imagination of a professional songwriter who works nine to five in an office. Many commercial country songs today are made in this industrial way, whereas, as I have discussed, it is a trait of hard core country that its puts emphasis on the singer-songwriters.

Conclusion:

Most fans and scholars alike seem to agree that authenticity is important when fans judge what is and is not good Americana and country music. The notion that music and musicians can be seen as authentic, in the sense that it comes from or is a continuation of tradition is essential to seeing them as good Americana music performers. A musician who is seen as part of a tradition is seen as grounded in something old and stable, as being true to his roots. At the same time, musicians within Americana should show that they are creative and true to themselves. A good Americana musician is not just a copy of their heroes. Their music should express something authentic about life, based on their own personal experience or observations. For example, Jason told me when discussing the singer songwriter Justin Townes Earle: “He does Travis-picking [referring to a style of playing guitar named after the country guitar legend Merle Travis], but he does it in a very unique way. He does the old stuff in a new way, and that is what we need more of today”. In what follows in this thesis, I will explore first how these connections to tradition are created within the social setting of a weekly live show. Thereafter I will turn to an examination of how people within the community I have studied subscribes to a way of working, which I see as a form of craftsmanship, that focuses on the process of work and the raw materials involved, be they experiences or observations that are to be turned into a song or coffee beans, and the process of working.

Chapter 3: Really Traditional Grooves

Beer, Music and Ritual

In this chapter I will look at how musicians create and sustain a view of history and tradition through the performance of Americana music. In particular, I want to look at the performance of music at a repeated event that I, as I will return to, see as a form of ritual. My case will be a weekly show at a bar and music venue that I have previously described as my hangout bar. I use the term ritual in order to describe the event as a whole, not just from the perspective of the musicians but also from the audience. The term ritual is also used in order to highlight the fact that the show follows a formula, being similar every week, and to put emphasis on the emotional significance the event carries for many of the participants. Furthermore, I draw on Steven Feld's ideas about style and groove and argue that events such as the one described below help create meaningful communities through shared knowledge about, and appreciation of, music.

Setting:

The event in question was a night known for its music and the fact that they sold beer below the usual price. The bar itself looked unremarkable from the outside. The building was a rectangular one story building made from concrete. On the inside there was a bar counter covering most of the right hand wall. The walls were painted black except for the area behind the stage in the far left corner, where the wall was covered in a red drape. The roof over the bar counter were covered in old posters for shows that had found place here. Along the left hand wall, there was a variety of vinyl record covers. A picture of Elvis Presley rested on a shelf behind the bar counter. What little lighting there was, apart from the stage lights, were provided by old drums of different shapes and sizes which had been converted into roof-mounted light fixtures. When I first started going here the bar was covered in smoke, but about halfway through my fieldwork the management decided to ban indoor smoking.

This changed the atmosphere somewhat, but most of the people I talked to, smokers and non-smokers alike, agreed it were for the better.

On this particular day of the week the music was provided by musicians hand-picked by the host of the night, a musician I have called Dennis. Most of the bands were small and unknown and often they were musicians passing through the city. Most of the bands who played had not played the event before, but some musicians made return appearances many times. Sometimes some of the regulars decided to play together in bands put together just for the occasion. From time to time a local legend showed up, sometimes just to hang out, chat and listen to music, and sometimes to play. These legends were musicians who were important to the local scene, and many of them had a following outside of Nashville or even, in some cases, outside of the United States, of fans that followed Americana music closely. Still, none of these local legends was international celebrities. The event in question was also an arena for musicians to experiment, of which one particularly interesting example was an unusual drum and organ duo who once played “into the wee hours”, as the DJ put it. Most of the people who worked at the bar were musicians and they would sometimes get on stage and play. Usually the bartenders played when they had a night off from working in the bar, but I experienced at least a couple of times that a bartender served me a beer at one moment then walked on stage the next. In other words, many musicians in the crowd were likely to get on stage at some point during the night. Dennis did not usually announce what musicians were going to play before the show started. I usually walked into the bar without knowing beforehand who was going to be playing. All of this made me feel like anyone in the audience could end up on stage at some point.

All the bands played about three of their own songs before they left the stage for the next band. In this way it was like a showcase more than a full length show. A DJ played rare vinyl records in between the sets, and he always chose a theme that was relevant for the week. On Bob Dylan’s birthday it was Dylan songs, on the week of Record Store Day, an international day of celebration of independent record stores, he played rare records that he had bought on previous Record Store Days. On the occasions where he played songs by

famous musicians it was often in the form of quirky cover versions by unknown bands on records that, judging from the popping and hissing on them, had not been taken good care of by their original owners. The DJ seemed to favor humoristic selections and surprising versions of well-known songs.

Dennis would take to the stage many times during these nights, introducing the four or five bands that would play. He was usually dressed in a cowboy hat and a sport coat with a t-shirt underneath. During these introductions he would usually have a quick banter with the DJ, who was equipped with his own microphone, the big shiny style that is often associated with early rock'n'rollers like Elvis Presley. The interaction between Dennis and the DJ seemed to me to be not at all flashy. They did not seem aloof or vain. They were friendly and professional and talked to each other as if they had known each other for years. They told jokes, but for the most part kept the focus squarely on the program of the night.

The actual introduction of the band would often be short and humorous, and Dennis would encourage everyone to drop some change into the tip-jar, either the one for the bands which was a huge glass jar, or the one for the DJ, which was shaped like Spider Man's head. This, combined with a cut of the \$2 per person cover charge, was, as far as I could tell, the source of income for the bands this night. Though I never asked anyone how much he or she made, I suspect it was not very much. It seemed rather that the value of playing at the show, apart from hanging out and taking part in the community, was to spread awareness about one's work.

At some point in the night, usually after a couple of bands had played their sets, Dennis would take to the stage with his band and play his own songs. The lineup was sometimes changed but the core of the band was Dennis with his electric guitar, a drummer and a bass-player playing an upright bass. They were all casually dressed. The drummer oftentimes wore a bowling shirt, and the bass player wore a cowboy hat that matched that of Dennis.

They all appeared to be musicians with years of experience. They played their songs without many stage antics and then they left the stage for the next band.

The bar usually started out almost empty, this was an off night in the middle of the week after all; but there would usually be a steady stream of new spectators. The amount of spectators would usually peak about halfway through the show. At the time Dennis and his band took to the stage the bar would usually be near packed with spectators. After this, patrons would slowly start to leave, in most cases probably because people had to get up the next morning. The bulk of people present were ordinary bar visitors who stopped by to have some beers and listen to some music. There were also a large group of regulars, many of whom were professional musicians between 25 and 50 years of age and they seemed to know each other well. Patrons were either conversing casually or listening attentively to the music. There would be patrons around small tables in the middle of the room, as well as along the bar counter. The bar counter itself ran parallel to the right wall, facing the stage, but it wrapped around towards the wall in both ends. At the end that was closest to the door stood a few bar stools with a clear view of the stage. This is where most of the regulars gathered. This was also where Dennis would usually sit when he was not on stage, and I once heard someone refer to his favorite chair as “Dennis’ captain’s chair”.

Good Old-Fashioned Equipment:

The musicians I described above chose to use equipment, such as upright bass and vinyl records, that was in some ways outdated. There are undeniable differences in sound of these old and the new types of equipment, which is an important part of the reason why the musicians chose to use them. At the same time newer kinds are much more practical. For instance, if the DJ had used digital music he could have stored thousands of songs on a small hard drive instead of having to carry with him a range of vinyl records and turntables. It would also have been easier for Dennis’ bass player to use an electric bass guitar instead of the upright, which is much larger. There is a reason why some musicians refer to the upright bass as a “dog house bass”. Another example of commonly used instrument with old technology was Dennis’ electric guitar, which was equipped with “passive pickups”, which is

simply a set of magnets with copper wire wound around them that pick up the vibration of the string and turns it into an electrical signal. Passive pickups are used despite the fact that there are different kinds of technology, less prone to picking up and amplifying unwanted sounds. By using equipment that was developed and came into circulation at the time when their heroes started making music, musicians are producing a particular idea of that era and its music and continuity between this constructed past and the present. It is worth noting here that guitars with passive pickups are still the norm for many if not most kinds of music. Still, I argue that the reason remains the same in most cases, but perhaps more explicit in Americana music, a genre that is in and of itself about a nostalgic view of a broad range of American music tradition.

It must be added that Dennis' music does not recreate any particular style of music from any particular point in time. There is a little bit of blues, rock and even some jazz in his music in addition to country music. The result is a blend of styles that would have been hard to create in the time when the individual influences were high fashion. He told me that he himself does not know what to call his own music. This indicates, as I have discussed earlier, that he wishes to be able to choose what music to play without being restricted by notions of what genre labels should entail. He makes music that is of his own time at the same time as he draws inspiration from the past, or rather specific ideas of the past, though he is too young to remember much of it himself.

Technology and Tradition:

The way the musicians use equipment to create continuation with tradition must be seen in the context of society today. Technology is rapidly changing our experiences, both in terms of music and our everyday experiences more generally. Many kinds music today is made using computer programs that for instance can replace the drums with electronic sounds. Another example is the infamous "autotune"; a term for computer programs that digitally corrects the pitch of a singers voice so that it does not really matter whether or not he or she can actually sing in tune.

The Americana music performed at shows such as the one I have described celebrates “human factor” and a view of what is authentic that favors people and not technology. Performers use themselves and their instruments to create music without technological crutches. The music at the show is about artistic self-expression and innovation within bounds of a tradition. It is not primarily about technical complexity or perfection even though skill is important. Occasional mistakes are welcome as part of the charm that it is to see someone perform live in person. Most of the bands that I saw play the show that is my case in this chapter was experienced enough not to make many mistakes. When they did it was usually followed by a humorous comment, which glossed over the mistake itself and reinforced the friendly atmosphere. Arguably it is also easier to relate to an artist when it is just a person with his instruments and not computer programs that are making the music. In cases such as the show in question musicians also mingle with and perform right in front of the audience instead of being on some huge stage far of in the distance, or on the screen of a computer or cellphone. This closeness also helps create a bond between performer and spectator.

The equipment and styles of the period between 1950 and 1970 has taken on a meaning that is different from the time they were invented. They have become timeless symbols of a romanticized vision of a way of making and performing music, and a continuation of history and tradition. In contrast, when these instruments were created and put into use by the musical icons we have come to associate them with, they were high fashion and at the cutting edge of technology. The equipment can be seen as grounded and traditional, as opposed to the new and digital sounds that have become important for commercial pop music. When I interviewed Jason, for instance, he at one point pointed vaguely in the direction of the speaker in the coffee shop and said: “Technology is just so crazy now, you can make anything digitally, and who can tell whether that drum is a drum or just a computer?”

The Bar as a Ritual Space:

Paying homage to and recreating a tradition is one thing, but how does the show I have described become significant for the musicians and fans involved? One perspective of this would be that Americana music gains significance in that it is performed in a context that resembles a ritual. The show I have described is an example of this. It is after all an event that takes place every week, in more or less the same way and it is, judging by the number of regulars, a significant happening for some of the people involved. The anthropologist Paul Connerton writes that the term ritual refers to a “...rule governed activity of symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance” (Connerton 1989: 44). As a rule governed activity, rituals must not vary too much from one performance to the next. Furthermore, there must be a limit to the amount of variance in how the ritual plays out. Even though rituals can be performed many different ways it cannot stray too far without losing its symbolic significance.

I do not want to argue that the event in question is a ritual simply because it makes it sound important. Neither do I want to argue that the event was the same as very different rituals. I rather hope to drive home the point that the show was something more than just one show among many, or a routine, even if it was not the most flamboyant or dramatic display. It was an event that was repeated weekly and which was an important arena for sociality and artistic expression for music fans, established local musicians and newcomers alike, and so a significant part of their life. Furthermore, it was an arena for creative expression, and many musicians experimented with different ways of playing their songs than they would have in a different context, but the show still adhered to a basic formula. For instance, most of the bands that played were not loud, and most of them also played instruments that were like the instruments played by their heroes, and so helped create an idea of the past. This means that people know what to expect, which further reinforces the significance of the event.

Getting into the Groove:

The next step in my argument, after examining how the event is a collective ritual, is to look into how the importance of event is experienced by the spectators and musicians involved. An expression that is often used by musicians and musicologists alike, when talking about the experience of being immersed in music, is groove. Feld draws a parallel between groove and style in saying that “Groove and style are distilled essences, crystallizations of collaborative expectancies in time” (Feld 1988: 74). Knowledge about a style or a work of art allows one to appreciate the subtleties of the performance in question, and to have certain expectations of what is to come. Experiencing music that you are sufficiently knowledgeable about to appreciate its subtleties is a deeply meaningful activity, particularly when shared with other people with the same knowledge of styles. This experience, in turn, makes for a powerful sense of togetherness and sociality. As Feld further notes: ““Getting into the groove” also describes a feelingful participation, a positive physical and emotional attachment, a move from being “hip to it” to “getting down” and being “into it.” A “groove” is a comfortable place to be” (Feld 1988: 45).

In my particular case, Felds perspective makes it possible to see the night as being deeply significant even though it was not an arena for passionate displays of emotion. Though people were not out of themselves with raw emotion at the bar, it is still true that participating in the music being performed on the one hand, and the program of the night being performed as a ritual on the other hand, made many people experience a sense of emotional ease and togetherness. It was my impression, both from observation and from personal experience, that the bar was a place where you could for a while ignore everyday stress and simply enjoy good company and a variety of good music. While it is hard to observe anything about people’s emotions, it was evident from the amount of people chatting casually or listening to the music and bobbing their head to its rhythm, that most people these nights were at least enjoying some kind of escape and sociality. People seemed to have a good time, even on the nights when many seemed to agree that the music was not great. An example of such a night with music that was seen by several people as below average was a night the week after the huge industry festival South By South West in Austin, Texas. The program that night was full of bands that stopped by Nashville on their way

home. I heard many of the regulars at the end of the bar discussing the bands, and one of them turned to me and asked me what I thought. His tone of voice indicated to me that he meant to say that he himself was not enthusiastic. Quickly I found myself in a discussion with the people around me, most of which were not impressed by the bands on the stage. On this night the event in question became an arena for togetherness within the group of regulars, despite, or perhaps because of, the lacking enthusiasm for the main attraction, the live music. The lacking quality of the bands on stage became a topic of discussion in itself. This furthered the shared knowledge and opinion of style that Feld describes as essential to musically focused communities.

For Feld, style is more than just the sounds and techniques that characterizes genres. Style is the creation and reproduction of culturally deeply significant symbols that influences the social reality of all people involved in it, that is, all people who are in that particular groove (Feld 1988: 107). A style is, in other words shared conceptions, and in many cases it comes to represent a community of fans. Feld quotes the musicologist Charles Keil in saying that: "The presence of style indicates a strong community, an intense sociability that has been given shape through time, an assertion of control over collective feelings so powerful that any expressive innovator in the community will necessarily put his or her content into that shaping continuum and no other" (Feld: 1988: 84). Fans come together in their appreciation of a certain style, which encourages artists to draw inspiration from it. When Dennis and the other musicians choose to utilize similar instruments this is partly because these instruments are meaningful to a community, a community that the musical performances in turn help to maintain and recreates.

The event in question was a night for different bands playing more or less mellow music, and lighthearted joking between members of the different bands between the sets. From my experience this helped create a friendly atmosphere where the focus was on relaxing conversations and cooperation. The shows at the bar were fronted as a space for artists to express themselves and show their skills at same time as it was a community they took part in. Dennis even told me that the whole idea of the weekly show started when he asked some

friends that he was bowling with whether or not they wanted to come and play a short set at the bar. I would further argue that this atmosphere reflects some ideals that are prevalent among most of the musicians that I talked to. For many of them their music represented first and foremost all that they saw as good about America, the freedom and cooperation that is often seen as the potential of the country, though it has not always been its reality.

I asked Jason why he thought Americana is popular in Europe, to which he answered: “It is a search for something authentically American. There is something admirable in the American spirit, despite all the bad stuff”. As the name of the genre suggests, Americana music is not only about what can be seen as authentic music, but also what is seen as authentically American. Furthermore, Jason highlighted how American music has always been subject to what he calls “crosspollination of culture”; different people with different backgrounds have come together and played music, which have led to a blending of styles. As an example of this, he cited the 1987 movie “Matewam”, in which he said that there is a scene with an Italian immigrant playing mandolin with and African-American playing the banjo. This vision of cooperation is clearly different from the reality of America as a nation, where there are still communities clearly segregated based on race. It is also different from the popular conception of American music, where for instance country music is clearly bound up with race, specifically with white people. Still, the movie Jason cites clearly shows the ideal that Americana is supposed to be a broader and more inclusive representation of American folk music. The idea is that the genres we enjoy today, such as blues and country music were not, in their early days, as segregated as some people think. Country music was, in this perspective, not purely or authentically white people’s music, it has always been mixed with many different styles. Like in the movie Metwam that Jason mentioned, immigrants brought their own musical instruments and musical styles and it all blended into the diverse genres that are the building blocks of Americana music.

Conclusion:

There is a lot at stake at shows such as the one I have described, even though they are informal in nature. Through drawing on their influences, artists help recreate and blend

musical traditions and create something new. At the same time they connect it to a past and a tradition that lends them legitimating power, making it part of a continuity that has historical roots. The fact that the musical performance takes place within a ritual context further reinforces the significance of the event and allows for audience participation. The audience is an obvious part of this ritual. Without them, the band would just be playing for the bartenders. While bartenders might listen to the music, and so be an audience, they are the bare minimum of what constitutes a crowd in a bar, not to mention the fact that they are paid to be there. Such a show would not be a significant event at all, except maybe as a sign of the bad state of a band's career, even in a situation where the bartenders are musicians themselves. It is when the audience joins in on the performance and "drops into the groove" so to speak that the full cultural and emotional potential of the ritual is realized and one starts to develop deeply meaningful shared ideas. These ideas are based on similar ideal, most obviously in terms of style, but, as I have argued, at some level also more general and abstract ideals, such as what America should be.

Chapter 4: Craftsmanship.

Quality over Quantity in Work

One of the things that most of the Americana musicians I knew had in common was that many people I talked to called them “hip”. The negative stereotypes that are often associated with commercial country music were not used in discussions of Americana music. In a sense it was safer to like Americana music than commercial country music. I argue that one of the reasons why these musicians were seen by many as “hip” was that they made their music in a way that was different from that of commercial country music, and even much of pop music more generally. The musicians worked in a way that was more like craftsmanship than mass production. They focused on the particular and unique instead of the uniform. This attitude of craftsmanship is, I will argue, also true for a lot of other businesses and non-music artists who are part of the same community as the musicians that I knew. I further argue that craftsmanship can be understood as a form of Bourdieu’s cultural capital, understood as an accumulated authority based on cultural knowledge, such as for instance knowledge about music genres, or behavior, knowing how to behave in certain setting, such as for instance an Americana concert. The people I knew in East Nashville appreciated quality, and knowledge about how to create things well by hand, be they songs or coffee, gave status. This status could in turn give a competitive advantage in the market.

The Coffee Shop:

East Nashville as a neighborhood and Americana as a style of music is often hailed by the media and residents alike as a “cool” and “hip” alternative to the more mainstream areas of Nashville and the commercial country music that these areas are associated with it. This does, however, not answer many questions as to what exactly the term “hip” means. Once during my fieldwork I found myself sitting in a coffee shop I took to be hip, and I asked myself what exactly gave this particular coffee shop this status. I looked for clues around me. The room itself looked big and airy. The impression I got from sitting inside was in contrast

to what it looked like from the outside. From the front it looked to me simply as a small one story building with darkly tinted windows covering much of the front wall. The floors and walls looked like plain grey concrete. Basic tables and chairs were the only furniture in view, iron frames with a wooden top for the tables and a plywood seat and back support for the chairs. This description applied for all of the furniture, but I could still not see many tables or chairs that matched. Many of the tables had letters carved into them, seemingly at random, and some had decorative paintings on the tabletop. Paintings and photographs for sale covered the walls. I noticed that at least a few of the photographs in one exhibition focused on iconic places in the neighborhood. Periodically, the photos and paintings were changed to make room for new artists.

The counter was along the left wall and behind it I could see large partitions that roughly separated the staff area from the seating area. Behind the counter was a substantial selection of equipment for brewing coffee. On a big blackboard above the counter was a menu of different kinds of flavored espresso-based drinks, served cold or warm. I was told that the staff was involved in making the recipes for these drinks. The blackboard itself was covered in elaborate chalk drawings and illustrations between the writing, and both the drawing and the selection of drinks was changed on a seasonal basis. In addition to these drinks they sold black coffee, usually with two options in terms of how the beans had been roasted and what country they came from. Lastly, the coffee shop sold a range of other locally produced goods ranging from cookies and ice cream to bags of whole coffee beans that had been roasted in house.

Defining Craftsmanship:

I argue that the way of working described above is a tribute to the particular, local and hand crafted. It is an attempt at returning to craftsmanship. The sociologist Richard Sennett putts forth one definition of the term craftsman that I find useful. In his attempt at identifying craftsmanship as a timeless concept, he defines the craftsman as someone who is engaged in work, without putting too much emphasis on the outcome but rather making the process of doing good work the goal (Sennett 2008: 9). In his view, craftsmanship is a practice of

working that is shared by renaissance painters as well as some modern day computer programmers. From my observations it also applies to people working at certain coffee shops and music studios. Craftsmanship is, in short, the condition of having mastered an activity to the extent that the activity rather than the outcome becomes the goal, which in the end, according to Sennett, should lead to a higher quality product (Sennett 2008: 20). For instance, when it comes to the espresso based drinks, employees had to brew the coffee and then mix it themselves with different kinds of milk and flavored syrups. Sennett argues further that the craftsman's work is social in nature. Craftsmen cooperate within a clearly defined hierarchy with mutual respect between boss and employee in order to create a high quality product (Sennett 2008: 31). In my case, at the coffee shop, the employees would give each other different roles, some taking orders and others making the coffee in order to keep the line moving. Dividing the work in this way would not have been needed if the employees had not put effort into making quality coffee by hand.

The Studio as a Creative Space:

I argue further that craftsmanship is also practiced in making music. An example of this can be drawn from one of the studios I was invited to visit. It was located in an old abandoned-looking warehouse. When I got there the musicians were relaxing and taking a break on an old and weathered couch outside the door. Inside was a large room with several beaten up chandeliers hanging from the roof with only a few lightbulbs in each one. I saw a staircase to my left as I entered. On closer inspection I saw that the floor that had been at the top of the staircase had been demolished. Now there was simply nothing at the top of it. Electrical cables dangled beneath the staircase. These cables were the last remnants of a wall that had used to be there. I could not see any no sound proof booths like there are in many upscale studios, designed to isolate the sound of different instruments so that each instrument can be tweaked or changed after the actual recording. Instead there were partitions with soundproofing set up in the middle of the room. They formed a u-shape, and the open front faced the console where the producer and engineer were sitting. The floor was covered with old carpets to dampen the sound. On the wall I saw large paintings. Couches were set up close to the door, out of the way of the sound booth and console. These couches were used by musicians who were not part of the recording at the given moment. Between the couches

was a coffee table with a range of items on it, including an old paperback version of a book by Nietzsche. I spotted an impressive range of musical instruments lying out of the way along the walls, ready to be picked up if need be.

At one point, when recording the vocals for one song proved particularly frustrating, everyone retreated into a separate side room. The walls of this room were covered with pictures, including one with a selection of police mug shots of rock and roll legends. The center piece of this room was a ping-pong table. The producer told me half-jokingly that every good studio has a ping-pong table. It was easy to tell that both the producer and the musician were frustrated when they left the main room, but after playing several energetic rounds of ping-pong they seemed to have calmed down. They returned to their work, and it did not take long until they made a breakthrough in the recording.

The studio was close to the train tracks. From time to time a train blew its whistle as it passed by. This sound could easily be heard inside the studio. In most music studios this sound would probably be seen as unwanted noise pollution. The point of a music studio is after all to have a room that is separated from outside noise so that one can control what sounds end up on the record. The producer on this session did, however, not seem to mind the whistle sound. At one point a train whistle blew while the producer was in the middle of explaining how he wanted the musician to focus on singing with spirit rather than focusing on hitting all the notes perfectly. At hearing the whistle blow the producer immediately interrupted himself, turned to the engineer and said: record!

What happened when the producer heard the train whistle is an example of how factors many musicians would have seen as shortcomings can be turned into a creative resource. The train whistle is an important symbol in the American mythos of traveling musicians. The producer told me afterwards that he knew that this sound and its connotations would inspire the singer, and so took the opportunity of putting it on the record. Furthermore, when the producer broke off mid-sentence to start the recording it became a spontaneous

creative decision. When everyone suddenly turned quiet and the musician started singing I got the impression, later confirmed in conversation with the producer, that this was a special moment. The producer and the musician made a spontaneous creative decision, based on a meaningful sound that would not have been heard if it had not been for the fact that the studio had poor soundproofing.

Experimentation and Learning in Craftsmanship:

The situation with the train whistle also sheds light on the relations between the singer and the producer. Though the singer would be the center of attention in the actual “takes”, the producer had an important role in shaping the sound of the product. Together the singer and the producer discussed ideas about alternative ways of playing the song they were working on. The situation above shows an instance of the producer acting as an authority and instructing the musician on what attitude to take in his singing. Then they recorded a take with the input from the producer in mind. Finally, they listened back to it carefully and tried to figure out ways of making it sound even better. If they were not happy they started discussing what they could change or focus more on in the next take. This process of recording and questioning the result parallels learning the way Sennett describe it. He says that learning is done through rituals of learning a technique, then examining it and looking for way to improve it, only to relearn the modified technique and so the cycle begins anew (Sennett 2008: 173-175). In the case of the studio work that I witnessed, the producer tried to teach the artist different ways of singing which they listened back to and examined, then recorded again.

The studio and the coffee shop were both arranged in a way that made it easy to change the layout of the room. The tables in the coffee shop were light, and the room was empty, apart from the tables and chairs, so it was easy to move them around and thereby change the room. The use of easily movable partitions is another example. Moving these partitions around would, in the case of the coffee shop, have changed the size and shape of the staff area. In the studio moving the partitions would have changed the room that was set aside for recording song, and the shape of the booth in turn shapes the sound on the actual

recording. The experimentation with physical layout can be understood as another example of learning way Sennett describes it. That is, as described earlier, a way of doing something is carefully evaluated then changed as might be necessary then reevaluated. This process of learning is one that puts emphasis on understanding what you are doing and uncovering and dealing with challenges along the way. This focus on the process of work is an integral part of craftsmanship understood the way Sennett understands it.

Sennet argues that experimentation is inherently linked to making repairs. His point is that repairing is just as creative a process as making something brand new. In making repairs, one first identifies a problem, then experiment to find a solution to it. In identifying a problem one learns something about how the object in question works. Repairs ranges from what Sennett call static repairs, that is fixing something without changing its function, to what he calls dynamic repairs, which is fixing something in a way that in some way changes it, either improving it or giving it a new purpose (Sennett 2004: 199-200). My point here is not to try to identify what kind repair is used in each instance, but rather to shed light on the way many coffee shop employees and musicians alike work in a way that is different from the preplanned and uniform, and in a sense industrial, way many businesses set up their operation. In furnishing the coffee shop with light tables and chairs that can easily be moved, or in setting up a simple booth in recording studio made from partitions, it is possible to change the layout around as needed. This puts focus on the needs of the particular client, be it an artist or a customer. If a coffee shop employee or someone working on recording music encounters something that they see as unsatisfactory they can easily rearrange things making it work perfectly for the particular context at hand. In doing this kind of repairs, in Sennet's sense of the term, they would learn something about not only the arrangement of the room, but also the problem they had to begin with, be it how people interact at the tables or how the singing voice sounds within a certain context. Underlying all this whole perspective is an idea of the value of and quality of hand made and locally crafted products, both in coffee and music. This stands in contrast to the mass production that is often stereotypically associated with the U.S.

Craftsmanship as Commodity:

Craftsmanship is to some degree a critique of a logic of production that puts quantity over quality, but craftsmen are not themselves independent of the market. In some cases the illusion of craftsmanship becomes a marketable commodity in itself because it is an effective way of setting oneself apart from the mainstream. Setting oneself apart by marketing oneself as someone who values quality is a way of practicing what Bourdieu called distinction. Keep in mind Holt's argument that what Bourdieu studied was not material culture in itself, but the practices associated with it, such as I would argue that craftsmanship is in this case, that leads to differences in cultural knowledge and, ultimately, taste (Holt 1997). Distinction is based on different kinds of capital. As I have mentioned earlier, Bourdieu defines capital broadly as the products of social labor in general even though the work might not generate benefit in economic terms, and he writes about social and cultural capital in addition to economic capital (Bourdieu 1986). Craftsmanship can be seen as an expression of cultural capital. Bourdieu outlines three kinds of cultural capital. One he calls the institutional state, certificates of competence from some kind of recognized organization. Musical awards and degrees in music or sound engineering are relevant examples of this. Another form of cultural capital he calls the objectified state, that is objects that are endowed with cultural and symbolic significance, examples of which include items or pieces of art that are seen to be of exceptional quality. The last he calls the embodied state, which is ways of being and behaving that endows the person in question with authority (Bourdieu 1986: 17-21). I argue that working in a way that is similar to what Sennett has described as craftsmanship is an example of the latter.

The point of distinguishing between these kinds of capital in Bourdieu's analysis is to highlight the fact that wealth and status is about more than just money. Hierarchy is reproduced by social connections and by knowledge about cultural goods and culturally appropriate ways of behaving as well as raw economic capital. There is also a market where the different kinds of capital can be traded for each other. Knowledge about what cultural expressions are valued by trendsetters can guide investors. Furthermore, like with economic capital, the scarcer a good is the more valuable it becomes (Bourdieu 1986: 18-19). A logic of scarcity might help explain why many music enthusiasts strive to discover the "next big

band”, while they quickly lose interest if their preferred band becomes too successful. This drive for discovering the next big thing helps sustain the large amount of new small bands as well as small businesses that pop up in areas like East Nashville and try to operate separately of big business, that is, they are more or less aligned with the autonomous field of cultural production. On the other hand this drive also hinders the growth of some of these businesses. When a band or a coffee shop becomes too popular and commonplace, its cultural capital sometimes become devalued and so trendsetters might start losing interest, often with claims that they have “sold out”. In other words, the businesses in question base themselves on an economy of cultural capital where quality is valued and availability and price is relatively less emphasized. The moment independent coffee shops or Americana musicians become too popular or resemble their famous counterparts too closely they lose the favor of the enthusiasts that seek out the unique and less known which is high in cultural capital. While this might be a critique of the practices of the mainstream economy, it still confines to a logic of the market, even though it is geared more toward niche than mass markets.

Art and Craft:

Craftsmanship applies to music as well. There are different ways of writing songs, something that is very apparent in Nashville, a city known for a large amount of professional songwriters who write songs for other people to perform. Americana musicians distance themselves from this kind of market oriented songwriting. They value music that appears to be made more or less independently of the market, and this is probably what Roger addressed when he told me his ideas on visual folk art. He values this art partly because it strikes a balance between tradition and innovation. He went on to explain to me that:

“It comes from a truer place. It is not made for the marketplace, at least not the earlier examples. It is art for art’s sake. That is what I am trying to do as well, to be true to the song. I am not worried about who is going to play the song. The difference I think is that mainstream target oriented music is craft not art, even though there are artful things in the market.”

The distinction between art and craft can be hard to draw. Sennett attempts to do so by saying that artistry is closely tied to the “myth of creativity” that I have discussed earlier. The essence of his argument is that there is a romantic idea that artists are inwardly turned solitary geniuses, while craftsmen are inherently social in their work and turned outward to society. Sennett argues that part of the reason for this perception of artists is that artists tend to seek autonomy, and they find it in solitude (Sennett 2008: 65). I argue that there is some overlap here between Sennett’s ideas about craftsmen, people working for the sake of the work, and Bourdieu’s notion of artist who identify with the autonomous fields of cultural production, that is, artists who think that art should be made for its own sake and not for monetary profits. Both Sennett’s Craftsmen and Bourdieu’s artists focus on their work relatively independently from worries of marketability.

The quote above also reflects another, though related, popular held idea that Sennett strongly disagrees with, the idea of creativity. In the conclusion to his book “the Craftsman”, he states that he avoided using the word creativity in order to avoid the romantic notions of inspiration and genius spontaneous creation. He tried to illustrate how craftsmen learn their craft, be that painting or carpentry. Sennett claims that art is not merely creation and craftsmanship not merely recreation. Rather, all craftsmanship is a personal expression and all art require technique, and so there seems in his perspective to be little difference between the two (Sennett 2004: 290). In other words, Sennett joins Bourdieu and Feld in pointing out that more people are involved in making art than just the individual artists. Nevertheless this romantic notion of artistry is prevalent, at least when it comes to songwriting. To some degree it is part of what motivates Americana music fans and musicians. Many successful Americana musicians are seen as artists writing song that are introspective and based either on personal experience or observation. Still, the musicians I have talked to said that when it comes to playing music most musicians are open to helping each other out. I asked Dennis about how he got some well-known musicians to play on one of his records and he said: “People are always around and asking them to play on your record is kind of like asking someone to help you move, you know? You say, I’ll buy you a beer or something”. While songwriting seems to many musicians to be a personal and

solitary activity, the performance of the finished product seems to be a social event where different participants are welcomed, more like the ideal craftsmen.

It is important to repeat my point from the last chapter that nostalgia in music does not necessarily lead to a desire to copy the music of your heroes. Rather, musicians aim to be like the visual folk artist, to spontaneously create an artistic expression of themselves, but within the bounds of tradition. Through crafting songs in the traditional manner, acknowledging their roots while trying to add something to it, many artists hope to make something timeless. This is probably what Jason meant when he told me in an interview that:

“Myself, I am not so concerned about making something brand new. I want to make something that will last into the future. Good Americana music should not rely on electricity; it should be something people want to sing around a camp fire, which is really a good definition of a good song in general”

Conclusion:

There seems to be a valuation among musicians and fans alike of all things hand-crafted. They value things of high quality that appear to be made through work and that is adjusted to the specific context through trial and error whether this is coffee or music. There is a notion that craftsmanship is better because it is different from the blandness, uniformity and the bad quality that is associated with the mass produced goods of today. Still, at least to some extent, craftsmanship becomes a commodity in itself. Products that are, or appear to be, handcrafted gain symbolic value as a marker of cultural capital, and so they become valuable in monetary terms as well. If the crafted can be seen as an alternative to the mass produced it becomes a commodity on the market that it tries, at least to some extent, to critique by being valuable in cultural capital.

Concluding Remarks

Hopefully I have managed not to take too much of the fire out of Americana music in the discussions in this thesis. I have touched upon a wide range of subjects and places, all in an attempt to shed light on a genre of music without any clear definitions. In the end there are, arguably, little reason to look for genres in the strict sense. The music will continue to exist no matter how I or anyone else thinks about it as a genre. Perhaps it is better to take the musicians genre independent view seriously and rather, as I have tried to, focus on similarities in attitudes and approaches, particularly the importance that is put on music that is seen as authentic, and the different ways that music and musicians can be given this status.

There are, as I have indicated, a range of actors involved in making Americana music what it is. All these actors have different backgrounds and perspectives. I argue, based on my material, that Americana music is, in Bourdieu's words, a field of cultural production that is relatively autonomous from the dominant economic field. That is, it is an arena where praise from established fellow musicians is valued more highly than sales statistics. Even some of the businesspeople involved in with Americana music, such as the independent record labels, seem to hold the view that music should be made for its own sake, prioritizing the musician's creative freedom over mass market appeal. That said, musicians, just like anyone, have to make a living, and so economic concerns are still a part for Americana musicians life. As Diane Pecknold argues, some businesses, such as the independent record labels, have been able to strike a balance by offering musicians greater creative freedom with smaller budgets. These small budgets make it possible for these artists to make a living from limited amounts of sales to a niche market.

Part of the reason why this setup of the independent record labels work so well is that it gives the Americana musicians the creative freedom that they need in order to be seen as artists and not just a commodity. The musicians are the ones making the creative decisions,

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which in turn is, I have argued, one of the factors that is important when fans make judgments of whether or not a musician is authentic. Being seen as authentic is one of the most important indicators of value for musicians within Americana music. As I discussed in comparing two different bars, the Station Inn and the Family Wash, there are different ways of achieving an image of authenticity. On the one hand is what can be termed as “being true to one’s roots”. This way of appearing authentic is about not straying too far from the basic formula that makes up the music tradition that one is a part of. An Americana musician benefits from being associated with a musical tradition, and therefore something that is bigger than just his own work. Americana musicians base themselves in music that is often times simply called American roots music, such as blues, country and folk. I see the Station Inn as an example of this form of authenticity. It was, after all, many of my informants’ favorite examples of a remnant of “the old Nashville”. The Station Inn’s status as a relic from the old Nashville is made even clearer by the fact that it is located in the middle of one of the most rapidly changing neighborhoods in Nashville, surrounded by brand new high rise condominiums. Furthermore, the Station Inn is a bluegrass bar and bluegrass as a form of folk music, puts more than usual emphasis on authenticity in terms of being true to the roots. Folk music has relatively strict rules about what sounds, techniques and instruments can be included in the music.

The other way of being seen as authentic that I have described above in the case of independent record label as well as the Family Wash, is that of being true to one’s creative impulses and background. This form of authenticity can be described as “being true to oneself”. Americana musicians should write their own songs based on either their own experience or observations they themselves have done. In the Family Wash all the different memorabilia that was hanging on the wall, giving the impression that they were too random not to have a story attached to them, symbolized this. In Americana music it is symbolized by the ideal within songwriting. Musicians should write personal songs that are based on their own experiences and observations.

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Musicians create a connection with their view of tradition in a context, often, in the case of Americana music, at live shows. Shows such as the one I described in my third chapter are arenas where fans and musicians alike come together to appreciate music, and this creates a feeling of community that helps make the perceptions of tradition in the genre meaningful. One of the things I noticed about these events was that a large part of the equipment that was used was either replicas of, or heavily inspired by, the equipment that was used by musicians in the 1960's and 1970's. There were plenty of electric guitars, but they were based on the first commercially available electric guitars from the 1950's. In a similar way, most of the musicians who played at the event drew on many different styles combining them in ways that would have been hard to imagine when the originals were made. For instance, Dennis' music draws on many influences from different points in time, such as classic country from the 1960's, rockabilly from the 1950's, electric Chicago blues and even some old time jazz. All the influences come through in the finished product, but he fuses the genres in his own way.

I furthermore argued that the show was a ritual in Connerton's sense, that is, deeply meaningful events that are repeated and don't stray too far from their basic formula. Rituals are important because it is an arena for people to come together and share meaningful experiences. This perspective on the significance of musical shows can be furthered by Felds ideas about groove. Feld writes of groove as a pleasurable state of being achieved when different people appreciate music together. It is about developing a common understanding and appreciation of music. This common appreciation then helps form musical styles. Style is, at its core, a certain way of making music that has been so impressive that other musicians decide to copy parts of it, and it is closely tied to communities that experience groove together. In this perspective, style is about more than a musical sounds, it is about the audience as much as the musicians or pieces of music, and it is fundamental to musically based group identity.

Lastly, I looked at how musicians as well as other people in the community I studied favored working in a way that puts emphasis on the personal and unique rather than the uniform

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and mass produced. For instance, there was a large market for locally roasted coffee sold in coffee shops, so much so that the coffee shops became important meeting points. These coffee shops fronted themselves as quality minded, and they produced coffee based drinks that were made by hand, either in the form of black coffee made from beans that they themselves had roasted or as one of several drinks made from espresso, milk and flavored syrups. This focus on the process involved in work is typical of what Richard Sennett described as craftsmanship. Part of the attitude of craftsmen is, according to Sennett, that it opens up for learning as you go. Sennett describes this as circles of learning patterns of behaviors, questioning them and the modifying them. This form of learning by doing is something I described in the work in the music studio I described in chapter four. The musician would record a take, then he would listen back to it along with the producer and the engineer and they would look for ways to try to make it better.

The attitude of the craftsman is, I argue, important for musicians who want to be seen as being “true to themselves”. In paying attention to the work that is done and experimenting with other ways of doing it, musicians are more true to their creative impulses. Still, craftsmanship can be a resource for marketing. I have argued that craftsmanship can be seen as a form of cultural capital in Bourdieu’s perspective. That is as a form of cultural knowledge that can be traded into economic capital, money, by the fact that it appeals to a niche market. This is true for coffee shops that want to give the impression, true or false, that they care about and prioritize the quality of their coffee based drinks. In the same way craftsmanship in music appeals to people who want their music to seem more carefully crafted and personal than the typical commercial pop music.

Authenticity is the common denominator of all the diverse topics I have discussed in this thesis. The struggle of different actors over what is and is not Americana music in the first chapter is a struggle over what is authentic Americana music. The weekly show at my hangout bar was a way of creating a view of the past that was shared by many of the regulars and which is in its essence about what it means to be true to the musical tradition, or “true to the roots”. Craftsmanship focuses on the work and the craftsman’s relation with

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the material at hand. In this way of working each musician's particular creativity and background become important, which in turn makes it a way of working that can be seen as more authentic in the sense that it is about musicians being "true to themselves".

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